LIGHT FROM THE FUTURE

PARSHAS KI SAVO

BY

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LIGHT FROM THE FUTURE
ESSAYS ON PARSHAS KI SAVO

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Dedicated to the Lubavitcher Rebbe, who, more than any Jewish leader, has prepared us for Moshiach and the imminent Redemption

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INTRODUCTION

The following collection of essays on *parshas Ki Savo* was taken from the weekly Torah messages that I have been sending to hundreds of individuals over the past 22 years.

These messages were written in the spirit of the talks of the Lubavitcher Rebbe. Several of them are actually based on or adaptations of his essays and discourses on the parsha.

The Lubavitcher Rebbe declared that we are living in unique times. He applied the words of the Midrash to our day:

> "The time of your Redemption has arrived."

The Rebbe stated further that the straightforward way for us to bring about the actual Redemption is by learning what the Torah says about Moshiach and Redemption. While learning Torah in general has the capacity to change our mindset, learning about Moshiach and Redemption has the capacity to alter of exile-constrained way of thinking and cultivating a liberating manner of thinking.

In this spirit, each one of these messages concludes with an application of the Torah lesson of that week to our understanding of Moshiach and Redemption, as well as to help us prepare for the coming of Moshiach and the imminent Redemption.

It is my fervent hope that these essays will contribute to the process of changing our *galus*/exile mindset into a Moshiach mindset, which is effected by the study of these themes in Torah.. And may this effort contribute to the imminent Redemption through our righteous Moshiach. Amen.

* * *

The Parsha Ki Savo is about the twin themes of joy and blessings.

In truth, they are complementary. When a person is blessed he or she will be happy and, conversely, when a person is happy he or she enjoys the greatest blessing.

There are two types of blessings in this parsha, revealed and elusive.

One could speculate that if one's joy is measured they have access to the revealed and measured blessings. But with unlimited and unadulterated joy one can access even the hidden blessings.

This explains the Rebbe's call for pure unadulterated joy to bring Moshiach, the age of unadulterated blessings.

ESSAY ONE

FIRST FRUITS

True joy is determined not by how you feel but by how you make another feel.

Complete joy is determined by how you make everyone feel!

ESSAY ONE

FIRST FRUITS

Expressing Gratitude

This week's Torah portion of Ki Savo discusses the obligation every Jew had to bring his first fruits to Jerusalem. Upon arriving, amidst great joy and celebration, the first fruits would be presented to the Kohain in the Temple. The Jew who would present the first fruits - known as Bikkurim - was then required to give thanks to G-d for all the good He has received from Him.

Indeed, the entire Mitzvah of bringing these first fruits was designed to enable a Jew to express his gratitude to G-d for everything. It was a time of joy and celebration.

For Everyone

When the Torah describes the obligation to bring the first fruits to Jerusalem, it stipulates that the obligation does not begin until all of the Jews have entered the Land of Israel. According to Rabbinic interpretation, cited by Rashi, this means that until all Jews were to have conquered and settled the land, no one would bring their first fruits.

At first glance this seems rather odd. Why should a Jew, who has already received his share of the land and produced his fruits, not be required to express his gratitude and joy to G-d? Isn't the mitzvah of bringing Bikkurim intended to express gratitude to G-d for having given us the land and benefiting from its fruit? Why should an individual then have to wait until the Jewish nation has taken full possession of the land before he can celebrate his own good fortune?

Jewish Unity

The answer to this question, given by the Rebbe, provides us with a profound insight into the unity of the Jewish people.

All Jews are connected to one another. As long as there is even one Jew - whoever s/he may be - who did not yet acquire a share of the land, it detracts from the good and joy of every other Jew. No Jew could experience the full extent of his/her own joy, if there is one Jew elsewhere who is still lacking.

To be sure, a Jew is required to thank G-d even for a partial blessing, but, the distinction of the mitzvah of Bikkurim is that it is designed to express gratitude to G-d for the most complete goodness and joy. Bikkurim, thus, is brought only from the fruits, for which the Land of Israel is noted.

Accordingly, a Jew cannot express gratitude for his unmitigated joy, when he knows that there are still other Jews who have not yet gotten their share of the land. One Jew's joy and happiness is only complete when all others enjoy the same.

Obsession for Moshiach

This explains the obsession Jews have with the coming of the Moshiach and the ultimate Redemption from exile.

There are many reasons for our desire for Moshiach:

First, it will bring peace to the world.

Second, it will facilitate the fulfillment of all the commandments, which are presently not practicable because we don't have the Bais Hamikdash.

Third, it will usher in an age of G-dly awareness.

In light of the Rebbe's analysis of Bikkurim a fourth benefit can be proffered.

As long as we are in exile, even if it is the most benign form of exile, with freedom and lack of persecution, our joy cannot be complete because there might be one Jew who does not share in the blessings enjoyed by everyone else. Therefore nobody's joy is complete.

Only in the Messianic Age can, and will, every individual's joy be complete.

In the words of the Psalmist: "**Then** our mouths will be **filled** with laughter." Whereas now we may experience joy, it does not fill our mouths, it lacks in its integrity.

It is no coincidence then that the word Moshiach in Hebrew, when rearranged spells the word *yismach*-will rejoice or *yisamach*-will cause others to rejoice. One of Moshiach's characteristics is indeed his ability to bring unmitigated joy.

Test it and You'll See!

Despite our inability to have complete joy, the Rebbe exhorted us to prepare for the time of complete joy by being happy for no other motive other than to bring Moshiach. This is what the Rebbe called "joy in its pure state."

The Rebbe explained that even when we are happy because of the good we do (and we should continue to experience that brand of joy) it does not suffice. That joy is connected to something else.

In addition, we should add on to our repertoire joy for the sake of bringing Moshiach, a time of unmitigated joy. In other words, we should be happy to enable us and the entire world to be happy!

So while Moshiach will bring us complete joy, our attempt at experiencing complete joy will bring Moshiach and the age of Redemption!

ESSAY TWO
GRATITUDE

A phrase, simultaneously, simple and profound is, "thank you."

It acknowledges that the world doesn't revolve around you.

ESSAY TWO

GRATITUDE

Say "Thank You"!

We always tell our children to say "thank you." We get upset when upon rendering assistance to another no thank you is forthcoming. We expect a receipt for our charitable contributions, not only because of the IRS, but, it is the mentchlich thing to do. And although this attitude is so ingrained within our culture, how many of us have taken the time to reflect on why it is so important to express gratitude, and where ingratitude can lead us.

This week's Torah portion of KI Savo, highlights the mitzvah of Bikkurim, bringing one's first fruits to the Temple in Jerusalem. It is was not enough to bring the first fruits, one had to also make a declaration which, among other things, contained the suggestion that one was not an ingrate.

Our sages tell us that the second sin ever committed was the sin of ingratitude. We all know what the first sin was. Adam and Eve violated G-d's command to them and partook of the Tree of Knowledge. The next sin occurred when G-d confronted Adam and demanded an explanation for his transgression; his excuse was that it was the "woman you

had given me" who was responsible. Our sages note that Adam, instead of expressing gratitude to G-d for having given him a partner in life, was ungrateful.

Acknowledgment

What is at the root of gratitude? When a person says Thank you, it demonstrates that they acknowledge not only the other person's efforts but, indeed, also the other's value and very existence. Not being grateful is a denial of the other person's presence in your life.

In Hebrew, the word for thanks is *Todah*. The related word *Modeh*, with which every Jew begins his day – in the recitation of the *Modeh Ani* - has been translated as either "I acknowledge," or, "I thank" because, in truth, thanking someone, is our way of acknowledging the other's existence. Without gratitude, the world would degenerate into a place where everyone recognizes only one existence; their own.

On a deeper level, failure to be grateful and acknowledge the value of others is simultaneously a denial of G-d's presence in our lives. If one doesn't acknowledge G-d's **creations**, then one doesn't genuinely recognize the Creator either.

All-Encompassing Gratitude

The Mitzvah of bringing the first fruits to Jerusalem, with joy – a prerequisite for the fulfillment of the mitzvah – and

giving the first fruits to the Kohain, was a dramatic way of acknowledging G-d's presence in the life of a Jew.

The Rebbe (Sefer HaSichos 5752) explains that bringing first fruits was qualitatively a much more profound expression of gratitude than the blessings we recite.

When we recite a blessing we express our gratitude in thought and speech, whereas the Jew who brought his first fruits also had to express his gratitude with action, by bringing his first fruits to the Bais Hamikdash and giving it away to G-d.

Another distinction that applied to Bikkurim is that one would express this gratitude with his choicest of fruits.

And a third distinction is that while reciting a blessing expresses gratitude we do not give away our food to G-d. Bikkurim, by contrast, requires that its owner actually parts with his produce.

All of these factors point to the all-encompassing nature of the expression of gratitude involved with the Mitzvah of bringing Bikkurim.

Gratitude at the End

That we read of gratitude in the month of Elul is no coincidence. As we come to the end of the year, our stock taking must include gratitude for all that G-d has given us the past year.

Our Sages tell us that the ultimate expression of gratitude we will make in the "end" days, in the Messianic Age. Then, our sages tell us, the only offering in the Temple will be a thanksgiving offering. This underscores the role of gratitude in the Messianic Age.

The way to prepare for the ultimate "Thanksgiving" experience is to joyously express our gratitude to G-d and to others, right now!

ESSAY THREE

GRATITUDE II

Humans are capable of saying thank you without even thinking what it means.

Indeed, humans suffer from cognitive dissonance.

The cure is to think what thank you" really means.

ESSAY THREE

GRATITUDE II

Modeh Ani

A Jew begins his or her day with *Modeh Ani* to express gratitude to the Almighty for having restored our soul to us. This is but the first of numerous prayers and blessings recited throughout the day in which we express gratitude for each and every aspect of G-d's kindness to us. When we take care of our biological needs we thank G-d for the incredible, wondrous, and intricate workings of the human body. We thank G-d for the rooster that wakes us up in the morning, and we thank Him for the gift of life itself. There is nothing major or minor that escapes our attention.

Missing?

If gratitude—or *hakaros hatov* as it is called in Hebrew—is so pervasive in our Jewish lives, we would have expected to find this imperative mentioned explicitly in the Torah as a commandment.

But search far and wide; there is no explicit statement in the first four books of the Torah that orders us to thank G-d. The closest we get to this Mitzvah is in the fifth book of Devarim-Deuteronomy. In the beginning of this week's parsha, Ki Savo, we are commanded to bring our first fruits—Bikkurim—to the Holy Temple in Jerusalem and express gratitude for the Exodus from Egypt to the Land of Milk and Honey and for the first fruits that we bring to the Temple.

In truth, there is one other place where the Torah commands us to express gratitude to G-d. But this commandment—to thank G-d for the food we eat—is also first mentioned in the Book of Deuteronomy.

One could ask the obvious question: Why does the Torah wait until the last of the five books—the Book of Devarim (Deuteronomy)--to inform us of the obligation to show gratitude to G-d?

It is true that the Torah has previously indicated where the lack of gratitude incurred G-d's anger. The first example is when Adam blamed his wife for his sin, thus displaying a lack of gratitude for the gift of a wife. Likewise, the Jewish people incurred G-d's anger when they complained about the Manna from heaven. We also find many references to individuals, as well as the Jewish nation as a whole, who thanked G-d. But one would have expected to have the Torah teach us the importance of gratitude directly by way of a Biblical commandment.

The Anatomy of Gratitude

The answer to this question is that really there is no need for the Torah to command us specifically to show gratitude because that is the underlying ethos of the entire Torah. There is no need for a specific statement to command us to be thankful, for this is what pervades all of the Mitzvos.

To understand this point we must first define the anatomy of gratitude. Saying thank you is not just a social nicety; it is what underlies a human being's ability to know his or her place in the cosmos.

When a person shows gratitude they are acknowledging that there is someone or something else "out there" that exists and upon whom he or she depends. It is our way of showing that we have graduated from the infantile obsession with self. It is the most rudimentary form of recognition of the other.

It is no wonder that the Hebrew root for thanks "*hoda'ah*" is the same as for the words "submission" and "concession." It is our way of declaring that the world does not revolve around us, that there is a G-d and other people with whom we share this world.

Thankful to Whom?

One of the expressions that some find irritating is, the phrase, "I am thankful." It is annoying because there is no "filling in the blank" by stating to whom the gratitude is directed.

The whole point of expressing gratitude to G-d or to others—who are G-d's messengers in "delivering the goods"—is to acknowledge that there is something or someone beyond us to whom we pay homage. By leaving out the object of our gratitude—although to be fair it might just be shorthand for the phrase "thankful to G-d"—we have not made that leap from self-absorption to the acknowledgement of the other.

We can now appreciate how the entire body of Torah literature conditions us to be grateful. The Torah and its commandments are in their entirety about acknowledging and respecting the existence of G-d and of others. Wherever we look, the Torah focuses on the other. No one can seriously adhere to the Torah's commandments and believe that the universe revolves around him or her.

Why the Need for a Commandment?

The question now reverses itself. If the need for gratitude underlies all of the Torah, why was it necessary for the Torah in the last book of Devarim to specifically address

this issue and command us to express gratitude for the first fruits and for the consumption of food?

The answer to this question relates to the new phase that the Jewish people were entering into. In place of the miraculous liberation from Egypt and the continuation of the miracles in the desert, the Jewish nation was about to enter the Promised Land, (seemingly) changing their status to a natural order. Once we get into the routine of life—even in the Holy Land prior to the final Redemption—we can observe the Torah's commands and be oblivious to its underlying message of surrender of self to a Higher entity.

This is especially true in the period of Galus/exile—which Moses constantly alluded to in his exhortation to the Jews that were to enter the Promised Land. In exile we can take the most sublime spiritual experiences and turn them inside out. One can, for example, perform the selfless act of tzedakah/charity thinking only about one's own goodness and righteousness and acting condescendingly towards the recipient and others. In this all too common scenario the object of the Mitzvah becomes the giver and not the recipient.

This phenomenon of engaging in an act that expresses a mindset even as the actor is obsessed with the opposite mindset is a psychological condition called "cognitive dissonance." In Hebrew the term for this malady is Galus. Literally, it refers to the geographic alienation of the Jewish people from their homeland. Metaphorically and spiritually,

it refers to alienation from your own positive behavior. You can do good and yet your mind can be in foreign territory.

Moses, therefore, provides future generations—including the ones in exile—with a more direct approach to gratitude. Some people cannot get the hint from all of the Torah's commandments to be grateful to G-d and to sincerely acknowledging the existence of others. They have to be told clearly and directly.

Don't be an Ingrate!

Moreover, for the Galus tainted mind one has to begin with the first step. One has to be told first to not be ungrateful, even if it means just paying lip service to gratitude.

With this premise we can understand how Rashi—the principal Torah commentator—describes the underlying sentiment of gratitude of the Jew who brings his first fruits. On the introductory words "and you shall say to him" Rashi observes: "that you are not an ingrate." It is remarkable that instead of accentuating the positive—to be grateful—Rashi chooses the negative, "that you are not an ingrate." Is that the extent of the Mitzvah of bringing first fruits just to not be an ingrate?

There is a parallel to this negative way of making a point in the Mitzvah of loving your fellow as yourself. The Talmud recounts how a prospective convert came to Hillel and

asked to be taught the entire Torah while standing on one foot, Hillel replied with the legendary words, "What is hateful to you don't do to your fellow." Here too Hillel did not mention the Biblical commandment to "Love your fellow as yourself", phrased affirmatively, but, rather, chose the negative way of phrasing it, "what is hateful to you don't do to your fellow."

The simple reason Hillel chose to phrase the admonition to love one's fellow in the negative form was so as not impose the highest standards for the prospective convert at that time. This convert, Hillel understood, was incapable of digesting such a lofty ideal as feeling the love for another as much as much as one loves oneself.

Analogously, when someone is making his or her first step towards developing a healthy appreciation for others—of growing out of the selfish, infantile mindset—he or she must take incremental, baby steps. One must begin with not being ungrateful. Little by little we begin to develop the skill of "going out of ourselves."

Modern Day-Miracles

Based on the above analysis of gratitude, it is no wonder that our Sages tell us that in the future Messianic Age the only private offering we will still bring to the Temple will be a Todah/Thanksgiving offering. It is only in the Messianic Age when all the forms of dissonance will

cease—including cognitive dissonance—and that then we will be fully capable of expressing the highest and sincerest form of gratitude.

One way of preparing for the ultimate Todah/Thanksgiving offering is to condition ourselves to give thanks to G-d for all of His abundant blessings as well as expressing gratitude to all those who contribute to our own well-being.

In this spirit, the Rebbe also encouraged us to recount the modern day miracles that we as individuals and as a people are experiencing. This exercise is one that elicits and exhibits our awareness of and appreciation for these miracles, which are a prelude to the future Redemption. Both the miracles themselves and our expression of gratitude for them pave the way for the ultimate miracle and era of gratitude—the final and complete Redemption through our righteous Moshiach!

ESSAY FOUR

THANKS, HASHEM!

The depth of happiness in our lives is in direct proportion with the depth of giving to others.

The Messianic Age will feature the purist and most intense form of joy.

ESSAY FOUR

THANKS, HASHEM!

Multifaceted Kindness

Helping others is certainly one of the central tenets of Judaism. But, what is most striking about Judaism's obsession with helping others, is the variety of ways one could express their concern for others. There is a mitzvah to give tzedakah, to lend money, to give one's produce to the Kohain and the poor etc.

This week's parsha deals with three forms of sharing our bounty with others, particularly those who are less fortunate than ourselves:

The first is Bikkurim, or the first fruits, that one would have to bring to the Temple and give them to the Kohain.

The second category includes the gleanings of one's field that one would be required to leave for the poor.

The third are the tithes, or percentages of one's produce, that one is required to give to the Kohain and the Levi.

Three Forms of Giving

These three forms of giving are actually three distinct categories. The Bikkurim are designated even before they are picked off the tree. At that time they are already designated as holy. The gleanings are left for the poor at the time they are picked. And the tithes do not have to be given to the Kohain until they are brought into the home.

These three categories of giving reflect three different forms of giving. The common denominator in all these forms of giving is that G-d is the real recipient. Even when one gave to the Kohain, G-d's special servant, or to the poor and needy, it is as if they gave it to G-d. Since G-d does not really need anything, He allows us to give it to Him vicariously by giving it to the Kohian, Levi and the poor.

But, there is also a fundamental difference between these three forms of giving. As was noted, the Bikkurim are designated as G-d's fruits even before their owner had an opportunity to develop a "relationship" with them.

This can be compared to the recitation of Modeh Ani in the morning. According to Jewish law, the first thing a Jew must do upon awakening is to recite the Modeh Ani, which reads in translation: "I gratefully acknowledge you, the living and eternal King, for having restored unto me my soul with mercy. Great is Your faithfulness." At that point, one has not developed a relationship with any aspect of life. Before going to work, before getting dressed, and even before getting out of bed, one expresses one's utter

dependence on and gratitude to G-d.

Stage two in the daily cycle is getting out of bed, literally and figuratively. One must get dressed and get ready to tackle the world around. At this point, one must still acknowledge that G-d is the one who is responsible for one's ability to function.

To express this sentiment, one recites all the morning blessings, and the Shacharit service, in which one thanks G-d for all of the bodily functions and opportunities one is given and prays for success in the activities one will engage in as the day progresses.

This can be likened to the gleanings that one gives to the poor at the time one cuts the produce and is about ready to make use of them in one's home. At this point, one acknowledges G-d's role in his/her life, but is also conscious of one's own capabilities.

The third stage in one's day is when one actually engages the world and asserts one's own dominion over it. This is analogous to the process of taking the produce into one's home, where one enjoys complete autonomy and exercise exclusive control over his/her own life. Even then one must give some measure of acknowledgment that G-d is in control.

This can be likened to the tithes that are given to the Kohain and Levi **after** the produce is introduced into one's home, the symbol of one's autonomous existence. Even

then one must recognize that G-d is in control.

Bikkurim: Most Profound form of Giving

Of all these forms of acknowledgment, the most profound one is the first, the Bikkurim or Modeh Ani, because it is the simplest and purest form of acknowledgment. Before we have a chance to develop our faculties, we express our gut feelings of dependence on G-d.

This, our Chassidic sages tell us, is the expression of the core of our soul, known as the *Yechidah* of the soul. The Yechidah can only be expressed when we are not distracted by all the other aspects of life and before we have a chance to assert our own identities.

Modeh Ani is recited before washing of our hands. This indicates that the Modeh Ani and Yechidah of a Jew cannot be sullied; it is always pure. Hence Bikkurim are the purist form of giving.

The Joy of Bikkurim

We can now understand why Bikkurim, as opposed to other forms of giving, are associated with tremendous joy.

True joy is an expression of one's innermost identity. When we touch our inner self it leads to happiness. Only when our identities and self-awareness is clouded does our temperament also become clouded and depressed. In such

situations, one must look for external stimuli to bring joy.

Only joy that comes from our essence, the Yechidah, is unadulterated and can break through all the boundaries and stifling aspects of one's life.

Messianic Joy

This explains why the Psalm refers to the future Messianic Age as the time when our mouths will be filled with laughter. Indeed, the very letters of the word Moshiach, rearranged spells *yismach*-he shall rejoice, or *yisamach*-he will cause others to rejoice.

Why is Moshiach related to joy?

The simple answer is that he will bring an end to pain and suffering and usher in an age of universal peace with all of our material and spiritual needs taken care of.

However, the underlying reason for the joy of Moshiach, is that Moshiach's soul, we are taught, is the ultimate expression of the Yechidah dynamic. And his role is to reveal the spark of Yechidah within each and every one of us.

Once the Yechidah, or the Bikkurim dimension, of our soul is revealed, unmitigated joy ensues.

Moreover, in the Messianic Age, the Bikkurim-Modeh Ani-Yechidah aspect of our personalities will be expressed not only when we awaken in the morning and recite the Modeh

Ani, but it will be evident throughout the day. Then the innermost core of our soul will permeate every fiber of our being.

All the ups and downs we will experience will manifest themselves in terms of more and more joy.

ESSAY FIVE

STAND UP!

Mitzvos come in many varieties and are all good.

However, a Mitzvah stands out when it is done with excellence; both objective and subjective.

We should acknowledge those whose Mitzvah observances express that excellence.

ESSAY FIVE

STAND UP!

Bikkurim: Gratitude par Excellence

The beginning of this week's parsha discusses the Mitzvah of Bikkurim. When the Temple stood in Jerusalem, Jews were obligated to bring their first and choice fruits to the Temple. The underlying rationale for this Mitzvah was the idea of gratitude. Specifically, it expresses gratitude for the Land of Israel and gratitude for all the bountiful fruits it yielded.

Thanking G-d for all the good that He has blessed us forms the basis of many of our rituals, such as reciting blessings before and after we eat as well as many of our prayers. However, the theme of gratitude is nowhere as pronounced as it is in the Mitzvah of Bikkurim.

So special was this ritual, that it was accompanied with huge fanfare. Bringing the first fruits to Jerusalem involved music, decorations and many other enhancements. Central to the observance of this Mitzvah was the great joy one had to display in its performance. And while the Torah emphasizes the need for joy in all that we do for G-d, joy

was particularly important for the observance of the first fruit ritual.

Honoring those who Perform a Mitzvah

Another interesting aspect of the ceremony of bringing Bikkurim was the Mishnah's requirement that when people were walking towards Jerusalem, with their baskets of fruits, all the onlookers had to stand up to honor those who were on their way to perform this beautiful Mitzvah. Even those engaged in work—who would normally not be required to interrupt their work to honor anyone else—would have to stand to honor those who performed this Mitzvah.

The Talmud thus declares: "Come and see how precious performing a Mitzvah in its time is: While workers do not have to stand up when a Torah scholar passes, they do have to stand up for them (those who bring the Bikkurim)."

Let us try to understand why the Talmud singles out Bikkurim for such honor. While many authorities of Jewish law extend this requirement of standing in the presence of those who perform all Mitzvos, the mere fact that it was stated specifically in reference to the Mitzvah of Bikkurim suggests that there is something unique about this Mitzvah.

What is it about this Mitzvah that is so special?

Another question that can be raised, why does the Talmud refer to a Mitzvah performed "in its time?" Obviously, if one does a Mitzvah in an improper time—for example, if one were to blow Shofar during Passover and eat Matzah during Rosh Hashanah—that would not constitute a Mitzvah for which one must show honor. If one were to don Tefillin on Shabbos it would not require that we honor the person because it is not a proper Mitzvah. Why then the need to stress "in its time?"

The following explanation is partially based on a thought by the Chassidic scholar Rabbi Aryeh Fromer, of blessed memory, who headed the famed Chachmei Lublin Yeshivah in pre-war Poland, and who was murdered by the Nazis (may G-d avenge his blood):

Excellence not just a Choice

Every Mitzvah we do is an act of service to G-d. A Mitzvah by definition is an act that requires of us to give of our time, energy and resources for a cause that G-d deems worthy. Some Mitzvos require greater sacrifice than others.

Now there are certain Mitzvos that one could perform with minimal sacrifice and it would still constitute a Mitzvah. Obviously doing the Mitzvah with more dedication, beauty and excellence will enhance the Mitzvah, and is preferable. However, even minimal sacrifice would still be acceptable. One can give a hungry person bread and water and it will

still constitute a Mitzvah. However, the Mitzvah would greatly be enhanced if he gives the starving person a gourmet meal. This indeed is emblematic of all the Mitzvos.

Bikkurim is unique in this regard. The giving of one's choice first fruits is not just an enhancement of the Mitzvah; it is its very essence. The idea of Bikkurin is to take that which is most precious to us—our first and best fruits that we normally cherish for ourselves and are loathe to part with—and give it to G-d.

This is in regard to the objective aspect of the Mitzvah.

Giving Begrudgingly Not an Option

With respect to the subjective part of the Mitzvah, i.e., the attitude we have when we do the Mitzvah, one can do a Mitzvah begrudgingly or happily. The ideal, of course, is to perform each and every Mitzvah with great enthusiasm and joy. However, even when that joy is lacking it is still regarded as a Mitzvah, albeit devoid of the important component of joy.

In this regard, Bikkurim is also unique. The giving of the first fruits had to be accompanied with joy. Joy was not an enhancement of the Mitzvah it is its very heart and soul.

Bikkurim thus is the ideal Mitzvah both objectively and subjectively. It represents the ultimate in giving—the objective aspect of a Mitzvah—and the ultimate in the

attitude one brings to the performance of the Mitzvah—the subjective aspect of the Mitzvah.

In its Proper Time

Now when we perform a Mitzvah on a lower level—either objectively speaking or subjectively speaking—our Mitzvah is lacking. We cannot say that we performed the Mitzvah in its proper time, because at the time one does the Mitzvah there is something lacking; either in the Mitzvah act itself or the mindset of the one who does the Mitzvah.

Needless to say, we should never desist from doing an inferior type of Mitzvah, for, as the Talmud states—and has been discussed in earlier essays—"One should do a mitzvah even if it is for an ulterior motive, because from the ulterior motive one will eventually do it for the pure motive."

In other words, many of the Mitzvos we do are presently lacking, but will eventually be vindicated in the future when we mature and do Mitzvos properly. These "deficient" Mitzvos will be "rehabilitated" and made whole.

This may be the meaning of the Talmud's description of Bikkurim as a "Mitzvah in its proper time." Bikkurim, because it is a Mitzvah that demands that we perform it on the highest level of excellence—objectively and subjectively—does not have to wait to be vindicated. The performance of this Mitzvah is unique; it is the

paradigmatic perfect Mitzvah that evokes a sense of admiration and reverence for the performer of the Mitzvah. It is thus incumbent on us to stand in their presence. *l'havdil*, it is like the crowd standing for the pitcher who pitches a perfect game.

Many of the Mitzvos we perform today may lack the maturity and sophistication of Bikkurim, which will be vindicated and elevated in the Messianic Age, when the world will reach a state of spiritual maturity. At that time, each and every Mitzvah we do will be akin to the Mitzvah of Bikkurim.

Contemporary Model of a "Perfect" Mitzvah

One notable exceptions to the general rule—that the Mitzvos we do now are lacking in completeness—I believe, is the Mitzvah of dedicating a new Torah scroll. Anyone who has witnessed the joy and excitement that accompanies this celebration cannot help but to be moved and enthused by it. It is a Mitzvah that evokes admiration and joy. It's a Mitzvah for which we can all stand!

It is no wonder that the Mitzvah to write a Torah Scroll is the Torah's very last Mitzvah. Being last in Jewish tradition is a sign of its endearment to G-d and to us, as the saying goes, "*acharon, acharon chaviv*.-the very last is the most beloved."

It is also interesting that the Mitzvah to write a Torah scroll is mentioned in the parsha (*Vayeilech*) that follows on the heels of our parsha, *Ki Savo,* the one that discusses Bikkurim.

Perhaps, the message this juxtaposition conveys is that while the "perfect" Mitzvah of Bikkurim is limited to the period in which we had the Bais Hamikdash, and only applies to one who has first fruits, etc., writing a Sefer Torah can replicate the same "objectively and subjectively perfect" dynamic of Bikkurim, at all times and in all places and situations.

There is another parallel between these two Mitzvos:

Bikkurim, are a metaphor for the Jewish people who. like the First Fruits are also called "the beginning."

Likewise Torah is called, "the beginning." And the first word of the Torah "Bereishis" has actually been translated as: "two beginnings." And it is because of these two beginnings (Torah and Israel) that G-d created the world.

Please join my family and the JDC community in our celebration of the completion and dedication of a new Torah scroll—in memory of my illustrious father of blessed memory, Rabbi Meyer Greenberg—Sunday, September 13th at 2:00 PM, for a most moving and powerful Mitzvah.

ESSAY SIX

BE HAPPY!

There are two dimensions of happiness:

Being happy and making others happy.

These two dimensions are paralleled by external and internal joy.

ESSAY SIX

BE HAPPY!

The Thread of Happiness

A theme that runs through this week's parsha of Ki Savo is the theme of joy in the observance of Mitzvos. It does not suffice just to do what is right. We must also feel joy and excitement when we perform a Mitzvah.

This requirement of joy can be found in at least three sections of the parsha. In the very beginning, the parsha discusses the obligation a Jew had in the days of old to bring his first fruits to the Temple, and give them to the Kohanim, the priests who served there.

When a person brought his first fruits he had to make a joyous declaration of gratitude to G-d. In the Torah's own words:

> "And you shall rejoice for all the good that G-d your G-d has given you..."

The person who brought the first fruits must clearly show his joy at having the opportunity to bring first fruits to the Temple.

The Commandment of Joy

In the next section, the Torah describes how at the end of a few years of accumulating the various tithes of produce intended for the Kohanim, Levites, the poor etc., the owner of the produce must remove these tithes from his home. Subsequently, when he would appear in the Temple for the festival of Passover, he would make a declaration that he had carried out his obligation and distributed the tithes to their intended recipients.

Near the end of this declaration recorded in this week's parsha, it says:

> "I did all that I was commanded to do."

Rashi explains that this meant,

> "I rejoiced and caused others to rejoice."

In other words, the Torah underscores that there are two dimensions of joy:

First, rejoicing is not a luxury and it is not an option. It is an absolute necessity; an outright obligation, as is indicated by the text of the declaration: "I did as I was commanded to do."

Second, it is not enough to rejoice ourselves; we have a responsibility to cause others to rejoice as well. As long as the joy is not shared, something is lacking in our joy as well.

External and Internal Joy

In the latter part of this week's parsha the Torah speaks of how one must serve G-d with joy and a contented heart. The absence of joy is implicated as the cause of much suffering.

Here, too, the Torah adds a twofold dimension to the significance and necessity of joy.

First, joy is not only an outright obligation. Failure to be joyous in the performance of G-d's commandments can have undesirable consequences.

Second, it is not enough to have joy; one must also have a contented heart.

What is the difference between joy and a contented heart?

One explanation is that former is the external appearance of joy, whereas the latter is a genuine internal sense of joy that springs from the heart.

Another explanation is that the meaning of joy is excitement and enthusiasm for the opportunity to connect to G-d by way of observing His commandments.

A contented heart, on the other hand, refers to the sense of contentment one has for all of the material blessings that G-d gives us. The person with the contented heart is not obsessed with material matters and the pursuit of elusive happiness. In the words of Ethics of the Fathers: "Who is a rich person, one who is satisfied with his lot."

Indeed, to fully experience the joy we must have a contented heart. The constant pressures in the pursuit of wealth and material pleasures stand in the way of experiencing the joy that emanates from our soul's excitement when we perform a mitzvah.

Parallel

It may be suggested that the two dimensions of joy—external and internal—are parallel with the two aspects of personal joy and shared joy.

When our joy is external and superficial it may be a selfish experience; we are happy with our own possessions and accomplishments, whether material or physical. There is always the potential that if things don't go our way, it can lead to a loss of joy. The self-centered person will be upset that he or she does not have all to which he or she thinks entitled.

When, however, one experiences internal joy, it is a joy that derives from one's soul, which is by nature selfless. A selfless individual will share his or her joy with others. Moreover, the inner joy has the capacity to overflow and affect and infect others with the joy.

414

The numerical value of the two words *"b'simcha u'btuv leivav*-with joy and a contented heart" is 414. In the teachings of Kabbalah and Chassidus we are told that that number has multiple layers of significance.

First, it shares the numerical value of the word "*V'ahavta*-and you shall love."

This suggests that joy in the performance of the Mitzvos can only come from love of G-d.

Second, it is double the numerical value of the word "or," which is light. This connotes that these two levels of joy represent two forms of light that we generate when we do a Mitzvah, and the joy that the feeling of this light engenders. First it generates the light from above, and second it reveals the inner light of our souls.

Third, it is the same numerical value as the phrase "*Or Ein Sof*-the Infinite light," and "*mekor chaim*-the source of life."

Perhaps, one can add the following insight. In exile, G-d's light is eclipsed. We can gain appreciation solely for the level of Divine light that "fits" in to our limited and compromised spiritual forms. The forces of life that we can experience are secondary forces. We cannot fathom the very source of life.

In the Messianic Age, however, we will see the "veil" removed and the Divine light that will shine will be the unfiltered and unrestricted. In the words of the Kabbalists, we will receive and internalize the *Or Ein Sof,* the Infinite

light. And then we will experience the full extent of life, including its very source and essence.

Then we will Laugh

Thus, the Psalmists says, "Then we will fill our mouths with laughter." It is incredible that the Hebrew word for laughter-*schok*-also adds up to the number 414! This connects the idea of joy to love, Infinite light and the Source of life.

Only in the Messianic Age will we have the capacity to express our joy in a completely unrestricted fashion, since we will be capable of receiving and appreciating the Infinite Light.

As we wait for Moshiach and the imminent Redemption, the best way to prepare for it to invest the performance of the Mitzvos with joy. The greater the joy the more we remove the filters and obstructions that prevent us from enjoying the Divine light.

Joy is both the consequence of the Messianic Age and it is the potent force that makes it happen.

ESSAY SEVEN

ONLY BLESSINGS

Criticism helps to eradicate negative traits.

Positive reinforcement helps to reveal and actualize our positive traits.

We live in the age where we need the latter rather than the former.

ESSAY SEVEN

ONLY BLESSINGS

Six and Six

Prior to their entry into the land of Israel, the Jewish nation was lectured to by Moses. The entire book of Deuteronomy is devoted to Moses' last will and testament in which he strongly rebuked them for their past misdeeds and exhorted them to take the Covenant made at Sinai seriously.

In this week's parsha, Moses gives them instructions what they should do after they will cross into the Promised Land. According to the Biblical account, with the Talmudic interpretation of it, the following scenario was to take place:

Six of the tribes were to stand on Mount Gerizim and six were to stand on Mount Eival.

The Kohanim (Priests) and the Levites and the Ark containing the Tablets, were to be situated in the valley between these two mountains. They were then to turn their faces towards Mount Gerizim and commence to proclaim the blessings that were to be bestowed on the

Jewish people for heeding G-d's commandments. All of the 12 tribes would answer Amen.

Afterwards they would turn their gazes towards the other six tribes stranding on Mount Eival and then proclaim a series of curses that would befall them if they violate the commandments. Again, all of the twelve tribes would answer Amen.

Now, despite the fact that the blessings were directed to six of the twelve tribes, the blessing was intended for all of them. Likewise, the curses, though they were spoken as they were focusing on the other six tribes, they were intended as a threat to all of the Jewish people.

Why Divide the Nation?

This raises an obvious question: If all the blessings and curses were intended for all of the twelve tribes equally, why were they divided into two groups?

To answer this question it would be helpful to see which six tribes were to stand on Mount Eival, towards which the Kohanim and Levites looked when they uttered the curses.

The Torah tells us that they were: Ruvein, Gad, Asher, Zevulun, Dan and Naftali.

One might suggest that the reason these tribes were chosen for the curses was due to certain weaknesses they

possessed. The recitation of the curses was the means by which these weaknesses were addressed.

The Ruvein and Gad Syndrome

Ruvein and Gad were the two tribes that wanted to stay on the east bank of the Jordan river because they desired the good pasture for their flocks. Their desire to get their portion immediately was seen by G-d as a negative. They were willing to settle for an inferior level of the Land of Israel because of their desire for some ephemeral gain.

In our own lives, we can identify this trait as the desire for instant gratification, which blinds our sense of judgment as to what is the best course of action.

The Asher Delicacies Effect

Asher was the tribe whose share of the land was known for its delicacies. It was the land which produced olive oil, the fat of the land. This is a metaphor for the sybaritic pleasures that are associated with the material world.

This trait, of preoccupation with worldly pleasures, has the capacity to degenerate into hedonism.

Thus, the Trobe of Asher possessed this spiritual vulnerability and had to be included in the six tribes to whom the curses wee addressed, as a way of tempering

that threat to the future of the Jewish nation in the Land of Israel.

The Seafaring Zevulunites

Zevulunites were successful sea merchants. It is very easy to see how their involvement in business could lead them astray.

In general the metaphor for worldly involvement and distraction from spiritual matters is the turbulent waters of the sea.

Tus King Solomon declares:

> "Abundant waters will not be able to extinguish the love and rivers will not drown it."

Chassidic thought explains that these waters that threaten our passion for G-d refer to the preoccupation with and distraction from earning a livelihood.

People who are so inclined, need additional support to tackle their weakness.

Judgmental Dan

Dan is suggestive of judgment. The Talmud says that overly litigious individuals are very likely descendants of Dan.

Here too, we have a personality type that can be destructive. While justice is a virtue; people who are

constantly judging others can cause undesirable social experiences.

Likewise people who rush to judgment can misjudge people. This is why the Men of the Great assembly exhorted us in Ethics of the Fathers "Be deliberate in judgment." It is interesting to note that this is the very first ethical teaching in Ethics of the Fathers.

People who have a propensity for judgment must be given the tools to soften their nature.

Naftali Youthful Zest

Naftali was known for his agility. His trait was a characteristic of youth. The life, zeal and passion that goes along with youth, can also be a negative.

While energy is a positive thing in many situations it can lead to impulsive negative choices. Occasionally, youth need to be "put in their place."

In short, all of these tribes possessed certain traits that could easily go both ways. However, since there was a greater likelihood that they would be channeled the wrong way, they—more than the others—needed to hear about the pitfalls and challenges that they were likely to encounter.

The Other Tribes

Conversely, the six other tribes who were associated with the blessings were: Shimon, Levi, Yehudah, Yisachar, Yosef and Binyamin.

The tribe of Shimon's "punishment" was that he would be scattered throughout Israel and serve as teachers.

The tribe of Levi produced the Priests and the Levites, and a significant representation in the Sanhedrin.

Yehudah produced kings and legal scholars.

Yissachar, were arguably the greatest scholars who were especially well-versed in the most abstruse area of Jewish knowledge.

Yoseph was the leader of the Jewish people in Egypt, and his descendant Yehoshua led the Jews into Israel. The breakaway Kingdom of Israel was led by a descendant of Yosef.

Likewise Binyamin produced the Shaul the first monarch and subsequently Queen Esther and Mordechai the saviors of the Jewish people in the Persian Exile.

What these tribes had in common was there role as spiritual leaders, mentors and teachers. And though their traits could also be abused and harnessed for evil, a leader must be given much more positive reinforcement, so that he can actualize his powerful talents and be a successful leader.

Bringing an End to Curses

We are presently not only at the end of the Jewish year, but we are also at the end of the long, arduous exile. The Talmud states that we read the curses recorded in this week's parsha at the end of the year, as if to say, "let this year end with its curses." We can also paraphrase this statement and apply it to our generation: "let this exile finally end with all of its curses."

Translating this prayerful wish into a practical lesson, it can be said that now at the end of our journey—as opposed to the Jewish nation at that time who were first starting their journey—is the time when every Jew must be a leader, who is in need of all the blessing he or she can get.

We no longer need to expunge the negatives, as was the case with the six tribes to whom the curses were directed. The curses of exile that we endured were far more than anyone can have imagined and certainly sufficed.

Now, the focus has to be on revealing the positive qualities within our exalted generation.

Hence, even those who identify temperamentally with the other six tribes can assume the role of the leaders who need all the blessings that will help to reveal the phenomenal resources we possess.

Standing on the threshold of the Messianic Age, every Jew must share whatever knowledge he or she has with

someone who knows less. And even if one is involved in business and other more earthly pursuits, akin to the six tribes that stood on the mountain to which the curses were directed, he or she must utilize these business opportunities and the like, as a way of helping others and sharing their knowledge and experience of Judaism with them as well.

ESSAY EIGHT

...AND THE PURSUIT OF HAPPINESS

The pursuit of happiness is synonymous with the search for our inner soul.

As long as we forget that search, genuine happiness remains an elusive goal.

ESSAY EIGHT

...AND THE PURSUIT OF HAPPINESS

Elusive!

Joy and happiness are among the most desired feelings that a person can have. It is the pursuit of happiness that constitutes the American Dream. But, as much as everybody strives to realize joy and happiness, it seems more elusive than any of our other goals.

There are countless numbers of people who set their minds to succeeding in many areas of life. Whether it is wealth, fame or knowledge, a person who is determined to succeed, will most likely do so. The lone exception to this rule seems to be the pursuit of happiness. No matter how hard people endeavor to be happy, no matter how many material acquisitions, success in all aspects of life, the goal becomes more and more elusive.

It is no wonder that the entertainment industry has taken over our society. Our craving for happiness is artificially and temporarily satisfied with entertainment and fun. But, no sooner do we satisfy our desire for happiness, that we immediately feel the void in our lives and the need to once more artificially fill it with entertainment.

Punishment for Lack of Joy?

This week's Torah portion addresses the issue of happiness. In the middle of a series of rather harsh admonitions and dire threats of punishment, the Torah continues that it is due to the fact that "you did not serve G-d with joy and a glad heart." According to the Ari, the famed Kabbalist, it is the lack of joy that incurs G-d's greatest wrath.

It is incredible that G-d would fault us for not realizing the most elusive ideal known to modern man!

Bringing Life into Life

In order to resolve this difficulty, let us first reflect on what Judaism says about joy. In addition to the many references in the Bible and Talmud about the greatness of joy, it was the Ba'al Shem Tov, the founder of the Chassidic movement and Rabbi Shneur Zalman of Liadi, author of the Tanya and founder of the Chabad Chassidic movement, who extolled the virtue of joy. The fact that the Chassidic movement underscored the virtue of joy and enshrined it as one of its foundations indicates the close relationship that exists between the two.

The Chassidic movement instilled life into Judaism, by revealing its inner dimension. It is no coincidence that the Ba'al Shem Tov and the Alter Rebbe were both born on the 18th day of Elul, 18 in Hebrew is Chai, which means life.

By delving into the mysteries of the Torah and its commandments, by revealing the nature of the soul and its faculties, and by exploring the spiritual elements of existence, we reveal deeper dimensions of our soul and infuse everything we do with more of the soul's vitality.

The Soul's Natural State of Happiness

By nature, the soul is happy, because it feels connected to G-d. In fact, the true definition of joy and happiness is for one's soul – one's inner and essential identity – to feel unfettered and totally free.

To the extent that a person lives in accordance with the dictates of the soul rather than with the demands of the body, the soul experiences this freedom.

Thus, Chassidic philosophy – with its emphasis on expressing the soul's true feelings and removing the barriers that obstruct our emotions – enables us to experience the true joy that comes from within.

Sense of Fulfillment and Legitimization

Furthermore, Chassidic philosophy emphasizes the need for us to be aware of the purpose for which we were created. When a person knows why they are here and what is their purpose and that they are on the right path to realize their G-d given role in creation, there can be no greater joy. The

greatest sense of happiness comes from the realization that I have a purpose, that I count and that I am legitimate.

The joy that one can therefore derive from the fulfillment of every Mitzvah is indescribable to the soul. The Torah thus admonishes us because we served G-d without joy. How can one do a mitzvah and not be ecstatic? How can one serve G-d and not feel the thrill of being a Jew who is capable of serving the infinite G-d?

Searching for our Soul

It behooves us – especially in the introspective and soul-searching month of Elul – to find fulfillment and meaning in ways that relate to our soul. This will make the process of Teshuvah – repentance, or return – that is generally associated with somberness, into a joyous and happy experience.

Upon reflection we see that joy and Teshuvah are intertwined. If joy is experienced by digging into our soul to discover its natural propensity for joy, this is a form of Teshuvah. For Teshuvah is not repentance, but a return to our natural state of purity; the state our G-dly soul.

Thus, when we discover joy we have essentially returned to our soul's natural state, and conversely, when we do Teshuvah we discover the joy.

Contrary to conventional wisdom that Teshuvah is associated with sadness, we now come to realize that it is actually the most powerful way to experience true, inner joy.

Connection to Moshiach

The Messianic Age is characterized as a time when "There will be eternal joy on their heads," because then the inner dimension of our souls will be fully revealed and there will be absolutely no obstruction to our soul's natural joy.

Thus, we find that the word Moshiach shares the same letters as the word for joy. I fact, it can be read two ways: *yismach* or *yisamach,* which translate as, "he will rejoice" or "he will make others rejoice." Moshiach is chosen to be the ultimate leader, teacher and liberator because he is the one who experiences this unobstructed connection to his soul. He therefore, has the capacity to ignite the spark of Moshiach in all of us so that we have the ability to do the same.

The Rebbe, indeed, taught us that one of the prerequisites for Moshiach is joy. Joy has the capacity to break through all of the barriers that exist, including the one last barrier of exile.

Perhaps we can find an allusion to this in the very beginning of this week's parsha: "And it shall be *(v'haya*) when you shall come into the land…". The Midrash states that the expression "'*haya*" (and it shall be) is an expression of joy. Joy

is the means to G-d once more giving us the land where total peace shall reign.

ESSAY NINE

THE JOY OF REMOVING DOUBTS

A wise man once said, "the greatest joy comes from the resolution of doubts.

The difference between an exile and Redemption mindset is the degree to which we harbor no doubts about our role in this world.

ESSAY NINE

THE JOY OF REMOVING DOUBTS

A Joyous Expression

This week's parsha begins with the Mitzvah of bringing *Bikkurim*, one's first fruits, to the Holy Temple in Jerusalem. After one would offer it to G-d, it would be given to the *Kohanim*, the priests. It was not enough to bring and offer these fruits, one must also make a joyous recitation of gratitude to G-d for G-d's gifts to us.

To introduce this Mitzvah, the Torah uses the word "*V'haya*"—which means And it will come to pass."

Our Sages inform us that whenever the Torah uses this word it is an expression of joy.

The reason the word/expression "*V'haya*" symbolizes joy is because it is phrased in the future. A person who looks forward to the future and is not mired in the past is generally a happy person.

The question arises, why is there a focus on joy in the opening word of this week's parsha, specifically in this week's parsha that deals with the Mitzvah of bringing one's first fruits to the Temple in Jerusalem? What, we may ask,

is the connection between bringing one's first fruits and the feeling of joy?

Getting Rid of Amalek and Rejoicing

There is another matter that needs some clarification. The opening word of this week's parsha follows the commandment in last week's parsha to destroy the wicked nation Amalek, the nation that sought to totally annihilate the Jewish people. The question is: why is this expression of joy mentioned immediately after the statement that we are to destroy *Amalek*?

It would seem that the answer to the second question is obvious. When we no longer have to contend with an evil enemy that seeks the elimination of the Jewish people, it is certainly a cause for celebration.

However, the question can now be reversed. Why is it necessary to highlight the joy that follows the destruction of the evil *Amalek?* We don't need to be told to be happy when our lives are spared. It is natural that we should be overjoyed when a threat to our very existence is removed.

Self-Doubting

In truth, if *Amalek* was only a nation that was unmistakably wicked, the Torah would not have to tell us how to deal with it. And how to feel once the threat is removed.

Amalek, our Sages tell us, uses all sorts of deception and subterfuge, so that we harbor doubts whether it really wants to destroy us and whether we should confront it.

Furthermore, the very word *Amalek*, we are told, has the same numerical value as the word *safek*, which means doubt. In other words, *Amalek* is not only a real terrorist entity that directs its evil against their Jewish people, it is also a mindset that creates confusion and doubt about our own right to defend ourselves and indeed about our own right to exist.

Amalek is the sense of self-doubt that some experience. Are we really the chosen people? Is our Torah—that was given to us by G-d at Sinai—relevant today? Do we really have a right to the Land of Israel, or are we as our enemies contend—occupiers?

And when one is consumed with these doubts, one cannot be happy, no matter how much good they are beneficiaries of.

After we eliminate these doubts, and we experience the feeling of joy—intimated by the word(s): "***V'hayah***" (And it will come to pass) the Torah continues to describe the way we bring our first fruits to the Temple. By doing so, the Torah wishes to demonstrate the characteristics of a truly happy person; one who is filled with faith, hope, trust and conviction.

Two Expressions of Happiness

There are actually, at least, two important features of this Mitzvah that are expressions of happiness.

First, bringing our first fruits and giving it to G-d, as it were, is to express our gratitude. People who show gratitude to G-d and others are happy people. They appreciate everything that is given to them and acknowledge it by saying and meaning "thank-you."

A person who is plagued with self-doubt will rarely feel good about himself, and the good he receives from others.

Second. A person who has no self-doubt is always happy to give.

Three Levels of Giving

In fact, there are three levels of giving; the highest embodied within the Mitzvah of giving Bikkurim:

One can give reluctantly. This approach to giving was at the root of G-d not accepting Cain's offering. He gave begrudgingly as opposed to Abel who gave willingly.

One can give willingly, but they will not give away their choice or first possessions. This too was part of Cain's sin. He brought the most meager of his crops, whereas Abel brought the best of his sheep.

The third level is where one is excited to give their first

and choicest to others.

The Mitzvah of bringing first-fruits is an expression of joy that comes from the conviction that our heritage is true, our cause is just and our appreciation for G-d's gift to us—the Land of Israel—is complete. Hence, we enjoy giving away our first fruits, for which we worked so hard.

Lesson of Bikkurim

The lesson of Bikkurim is that we must remove all of the self-doubting that exists in our lives and look forward to the future coming of Moshiach.

This optimistic attitude engenders joy, which translates itself into profound gratitude to G-d for all of the good He has given us—even as we use our chutzpah to "demand" of G-d to bring an end to the suffering of the Jewish people. In addition, this removal of self-doubt and optimism is translated into actions that involve giving our best talents to helping the Jewish people.

Amalek and the Bais Hamikdash

Our Sages also connect the destruction of Amalek with the building of the Bais Hamikdash-the Holy Temple.

Why is the removal of the evil of Amalek singled out as the only evil whose elimination is a prerequisite for building the Bais Hamikdash? Aren't there other nations who harbor

ill will to the Jewish people?

The answer lies in the abovementioned connection Amalek has with doubts. As long as we are not confident with our special status, G-d, as it were, is not comfortable dwelling among us. While G-d can "handle" negativity He cannot tolerate when we have internalized the insidious doubts of Amalek.

The Bais Hamikdash is a place whereupon entering we come face to face with naked, unfiltered truth. One cannot enter a place of truth when one is in doubt about the truth.

Hence, the great joy of having G-d dwell in our midst through the construction of the Bais Hamikdash depends on us removing the scourge of our internal Amalek.

ESSAY TEN

TOTALITY!

If we had to find one word that describes Judaism it could be the word "totality."

While the Torah values every single detail of a Mitzvah, its goal is to realize total involvement with every nuance of life snf every Mitzvah.

ESSAY TEN

TOTALITY!

Carrying the Bikkurim on the King's Shoulders

This week's parsha discusses the Mitzvah of Bikkurim, the first fruits a Jew would bring in a basket to Jerusalem.

The Mishnah describes the manner in which the basket would be carried. As soon as the owners of the fruits would arrive at the Temple Mount, they would carry the basket on their shoulders and bring it to the Kohain. The Mishnah then underscores the importance of personally carrying the basket by citing the fact that King Agrippa (of the Herodian dynasty, known for his fidelity to Jewish teachings and the mutual respect that existed between him and the Sages of his time) would also personally carry the basket of Bikkurim rather than have one of his servants do it for him.

A question has been raised. Isn't there a commandment in the Torah to preserve the honor of a king? Moreover, a king who wishes to forgo the honor due him may not do so for it is not his honor to forgo, it is G-d's honor that he represents. What then gave Agrippa the right to forgo his honor and "shlep" his own basket?

The Talmud (Sanhedrin 19b) addresses a similar problem with respect to a king's performance of a Mitzvah that may be beneath his dignity. The Talmud explains that "a Mitzvah is different." When a king wishes to forgo his honor in deference to another mortal he is told that his honor is not truly his own to forgo; the monarchy is a Divine institution and it is G-d's honor that he must preserve. However, when he wishes to perform a Mitzvah that may appear to be demeaning, it is not a problem because what he does is for G-d's honor.

King David's Irreverence

A similar issue was raised by King David's queen Michal, the daughter of King Saul. When King David returned with the Holy Ark he "danced with all his might before the L-rd" and carried on in what appeared to be an undignified fashion provoking the ire of Michal: "Michal, the daughter of Saul, looked through the window, and she saw King David hopping and dancing before the L-rd, and she loathed him in her heart." And when she expressed her profound displeasure with his behavior, David responded that even if he would demean and degrade himself [even] more [so], for the sake of G-d, he would, in truth, feel honored.

In other words, when a king stands before G-d and "pulls out all the stops" although he appears to be dishonoring

himself, it is in the interests of honoring G-d, and is desirous and praiseworthy.

King David's response serves as a precedent for all of the apparent irreverent behavior, the "wild" gestures and gesticulations that accompany special holiday celebrations. It is not considered to be degrading and demeaning. Rather it is our way of displaying our passion for G-d and His Holy days.

Holy Folly or Wholly Folly?

Everything that exists in the realm of holiness has its counterpart in the secular and even in unholy domains. People go crazy in the presence of superstars and at special sports events. They will stand, hop, jump, shout, gesticulate and carry on, shedding every ounce of civility and normalcy. Yet that, ironically, is called normal behavior in our "civilized" society.

Where does that "craziness" come from? It really derives from the soul's passion for G-dly things. The soul is in a constant state of moving and shaking, trying to get closer to the Divine. If one does not dance and sing for G-d, the soul will find other outlets to let off some of its steam. And if it cannot express its passion for G-d, it might discover

that its passion has been diverted into frivolous matters[,] if not worse.

In Chassidic parlance two forms of folly are described: There is holy folly (*Shtus dikedushah*) and its unholy counterpart (*Shtus d'le'umas zeh)*. The Talmud (Kesubos 17a) relates that when a certain Sage juggled at a wedding to bring joy to the bridegroom and bride, he was criticized for his irreverent behavior by one of his colleagues. Only after his passing, when his critic witnessed a fiery partition that separated his grave from all the others, did he realize that this sages' folly was actually a sign of his heightened and unconventional spiritual level and that he was head and shoulders above all the other Sages.

If "holy folly" is warranted, even for the noble monarch, it is certainly desirous for the common person. And if one may, (nay, must), act unconventionally for G-d's honor during Holidays and other festive occasions, than certainly one must go to great lengths, even what some may consider "overboard", to bring Moshiach—the ultimate human monarch, who will usher in unprecedented and perpetual G-dly light.

Holy Folly and a Basket Of Fruit

We must still try to understand why the lesson of a monarch's need to forgo his own honor is derived from the

example of King Agrippa carrying a basket of first fruits—Bikkurim—from the Temple mount to the Temple.

There is something special about the Mitzvah of Bikkurim. Although this Mitzvah is one of many ways through which a Jew would express gratitude to G-d for His abundant blessings, there is something unique about this particular way of expressing gratitude.

When we eat, we also recite a blessing thanking G-d for the food He has provided us with, but when a Jew brought Bikkurim, it was not just a mental and verbal exercise, the Jew had to engage his power of action as well. He had to physically bring the first fruits to the Holy Temple. This implied that every aspect of his being was a part of this expression of gratitude.

Moreover, the person who brought the first fruits had to bring it in a basket. Not only did every fiber of the person participate in this outpouring of thanks, but even his possessions became an integral part of the ceremony. Not only did we bring our choice possessions to G-d, we did it **with** our possessions. That is what we call total involvement in a Mitzvah.

We can now understand why this Mitzvah, in particular, establishes a precedent that even a king whose honor must be guarded would personally shlep his basket to the Temple. Of all people, a king has a special obligation to demonstrate his total subservience to G-d.

The Talmud captures this total submission that a king must exhibit by relating a law concerning the central prayer, called the Amidah (standing prayer) or Shemoneh Esrei (Eighteen Benedictions). During this prayer there are four places where we bow our heads; two at the beginning and two times near the end. A Kohain Gadol-High Priest was required to bow at the beginning and end of each of the eighteen blessings. A king would bow at the beginning and remain in that bowed position throughout the entire prayer. Rashi explains: "The greater one is, the more he must humble himself."

In light of the above analysis, we may add another insight as to why the king had to remain bowed throughout the prayer. The spiritual dimension of the king is one of totality. A king exhibits total submission in every aspect of his being. His honor is G-d's honor. He must appear dignified and noble at all times. A king's role is to reveal G-d's Kingship to the people. No part of him can be permitted to compromise his G-dly role. The king must exude an aura of total involvement with his Judaism. This is one of the reasons why a king must have a Torah scroll written expressly for him and carry it with him at all times.

Of all the Mitzvos, there is one that reflects this notion of totality of involvement in expressing our dependence on and attachment to G-d. This is the Mitzvah of Bikkurim, which, as stated, involves our thought speech and action and our possessions as well.

Of all places in the world there is one that demands total submission: the Beis Hamikdash, the Holy Temple in Jerusalem.

Hence, the king, the person who personifies total commitment, would demonstrate this concept of totality, particularly, by bringing the Bikkurim—a Mitzvah that involves the totality of the human experience (thought, speech, action and his possessions) - from the Temple Mount to the the environment that generates the aura of totality, the Holy Temple itself.

King Moshiach: Why the Emphasis on the Monarchy?

We can now understand why there is emphasis in rabbinic literature that Moshiach is a monarch. Why would that be important when we are dealing with an age of utopia and pervasive goodness and holiness?

The answer is that the Messianic Era is characterized by Maimonides as an era when all of Judaism will reach its state of perfection. We will have the totality of Torah and our Mitzvah experience will likewise be a total and encompassing one.

To usher in that age, Moshiach, the ultimate personification of total involvement with G-d and Judaism, will be a king. His role as a monarch is not so important to stress due to his power. Rather, it accentuates the all-encompassing nature of the king in his relationship with G-d and with the

Jewish people and indeed with all of humanity. Moshiach, more than any other person, personifies the Mitzvah and ideal of Bikkurim.

ESSAY ELEVEN

WALK IN HIS WAYS!

Art is imitation of the physical world, which is itself an imitation of the spiritual worlds.

When we imitate G-d we experience the ultimate art-form because we are imitating something real.

ESSAY ELEVEN

WALK IN HIS WAYS!

Imitating G-d

In this week's Parsha the Torah commands us to: "walk in His [G-d's] ways." Maimonides, the great Talmudist, philosopher, physician and Jewish leader, lists this statement as one of the 613 commandments and cites the rabbinic explanation of this Mitzvah as follows:

> "Just as G-d is called gracious, you too should be gracious; just as G-d is called merciful, you too should be merciful; just as G-d is called kind, you too should be kind." In other words, this commandments exhorts us emulate G-d."

Commentators raise the question: Why is this commandment listed as one of the 613 commandments of the Torah? What is so novel about it? Don't we already know from other parts of the Torah that we must be gracious, merciful, and kind, as well as all the other positive attributes that are associated with G-d?

A Traveling Mitzvah

What is unique about this commandment, however, lies in the way it is phrased. The Torah does not say "Emulate G-d," but rather "And you shall **walk** in His ways." The implication of this is that one's performance of the commandments should be in such a manner that it transforms the person to such an extent that the person has left the "place," i.e., spiritual state, where he had been situated before he did the Mitzvah and has entered into a new "location."

One can be kind, gracious and merciful, as well as all the other Mitzvos, and yet they cannot be characterized as having "traveled" outside of their previous environment. Only when one performs the Mitzvah as a way of emulating G-d and connecting to Him, can one truly change.

This is why the statement to "walk in His ways" is a separate command, because it demands of us to not only be kind, for example, but to be kind as a way as "walking in His ways."

This calls for further explanation. Haven't we been told by our Sages, particularly from the perspective of Kabbalah and Chassidic thought, that **every** Mitzvah we perform has a refining character to it? We are never the same **after** we perform **any** Mitzvah, even if it was not done to emulate G-d. In fact, we are changed even when we do a mitzvah for the most ulterior of motives. Why then does the Torah identify the process of emulating G-d as the only way we

can actually "walk?" in His ways?

Human versus Angels

The answer, given by the Rebbe (*Likkutei Sichos,* volume 4) lies in the true definition of "traveling" in the spiritual realm. The Prophet Elijah describes, and Chassidic thought elaborates on, the difference between an angel and a soul. An angel can never go beyond itself. Sure, the angel grows and constantly rises to higher levels. But, because an angel is finite, it can only rise to a higher level that is within sight of the level before it. The changes are incremental and relative. There are no quantum leaps in the world of finite creatures. Angels thus are describes as "standers" and not "walkers."

When we, finite human beings, perform a Mitzvah — no matter what the motivation for the Mitzvah may be — we are definitely affected in a positive way. We grow and rise to higher levels. But, in truth, we do not really move to a new plane. We are forever connected to where we were previously. It is only logical that a finite being cannot transcend itself.

Quantum Leaps

However, the Torah, in this week's Parsha, introduces us to the novel and revolutionary idea that when we do a Mitzvah as a way of emulating G-d, we acquire G-d's

infinite power to grow exponentially. Then we can truly be considered to have "walked in His ways." We have traveled infinitely, in terms of **G-d's** infinite capacity.

And while we rarely feel these changes that occur, even when we do a Mitzvah to emulate G-d, it is because we are still living in exile, which has a tranquilizing and desensitizing effect.

Future Dynamics

When Moshiach will come and usher in the Age of Redemption, not only will we perform Mitzvos with much more feeling and connectedness to G-d, but we will also feel the effects of those Mitzvos that we already performed in the days of exile.

In the Messianic Era we will experience the exponential leaps that are achieved through the performance of every Mitzvah including the one we do to emulate G-d. While in the present exile era we cannot feel these accomplishments, they will become manifest for all in the Messianic Era.

ESSAY TWELVE

"WHEN FATHER READS THERE ARE NO CURSES"

Curses are not real.

Our default position is our blessed relationship with G-d as our Father.

The definition of a curse is the hiding of that natural relationship.

ESSAY TWELVE

"WHEN FATHER READS THERE ARE NO CURSES"

Jolting and Ending

According to the Talmud, prior to the onset of the New Year we are supposed to read the Torah portion of *Ki Savo* with its numerous threats of retribution and curses that would befall the Jewish people if they would not remain faithful to G-d.

The reason for this practice is twofold:

First, it is intended to jolt us into realizing our responsibilities as Jews.

Second, by concluding the year with the Torah reading concerning the curses, we are imploring G-d that the end of the year should coincide with and reflect an end to all of the curses that have plagued us in the past.

Reconciling Curses with the Torah of Kindness

An obvious question concerning the curses that appear in the Torah prompted the Chassidic Masters to view them in

a different light. The Torah is known as *Toras Chesed*, a Torah of kindness. The Biblical book of Proverbs refers to the Torah thus: "Its ways are pleasant ways and all its ways are peace." How could the Torah actually utter such curses and dire threats?

The curses, they explain, are actually hidden blessings. These unconventional blessings are so sublime that they cannot be expressed in conventional terms. No normal terminology could do justice to the phenomenal nature of goodness that they represent. These blessings are therefore alluded to in a coded form; by employing negative terminology.

One who is sensitive can see through the curses and appreciate their true meaning and nature. One whose attitude is unconventionally positive can also uncover the unconventional good that is inherent within the apparent curses.

Father's Reading

A story is told of Rabbi Dovber, the son of Rabbi Schneur Zalman of Liadi (the founder of the Chabad movement whose birthday we celebrated this past week on Chai Elul- the 18th of Elul. When he was a child of twelve, and his father, the Rebbe — who was the regular Torah reader — was out of town, he heard the section of the curses read by another reader. He was so shocked and devastated by the

curses that he fainted. Even after he was revived, he was so weakened by the ordeal that several weeks later there was a question as to whether he would be strong enough to fast on Yom Kippur.

When he was asked for an explanation as to why he fainted. After all hadn't he heard the Torah reading of the curses in past years? Yet, he had never fainted before.

His answer was that when he heard the curses read by his **father,** there were no curses. Now that someone else was the reader, the words assumed a more ominous character. For the first time he had detected the "outer" and literal meaning of the words. They were so frightening that he had fainted.

To apply this to our own situation as the year comes to an end:

When we hear the Torah from our father, i.e., when we cultivate our father-child relationship with G-d, all of the negative things — all the curses that we read about — not only cease to be curses; they turn out to be the greatest blessings.

Thus by concluding the year with the reading of these "blessings in disguise" we are inspired to elicit our own hidden reserves of holiness — the father-child dimension of our relationship with G-d — for the new year. When they are revealed, all of the curses and negativity that we accumulated throughout the year will be washed away.

For the spiritually "unsophisticated" the curses are understood literally because it may be the only way to shock them into changing their ways. They are not ready for the father-child relationship.

But for the more sophisticated these curses are actually hidden blessings that express our intimate relationship with G-d.

The Curse of Exile and the Blessing of Redemption

These two dimensions of the "curses" reflect the difference between exile and Redemption.

Exile has been likened to a curse. There is no greater absence of blessing than when we are in exile subject to all the suffering and pain and spiritual decline. The absence of the Bais Hamikdash is a powerful curse and we pray every day for its reconstruction.

Conversely, there is no greater blessing than the Messianic Age, when all of the ills of the world will be corrected and G-d's presence will be channeled to the entire world through the rebuilt Holy Temple.

So when we read about curse/hidden blessings we have to realize that the former is intended to jolt us out of our comfort zone in exile, while the latter is to get us to desire

and long for Moshiach and Redemption.

In truth, exile already contains the powerful and unconventional blessings, but they are hidden. Moshiach will be the one to reveal these pre-existing blessings.

ESSAY THIRTEEN
IN THE FIELD AND IN THE CITY

Serving G-d with formality is a positive thing.

But G-d wants us to serve Him in informal ways and informal contexts as well.

ESSAY THIRTEEN

IN THE FIELD AND IN THE CITY

Perfect Blessing: Synthesis

In this week's parsha the Torah records Moses communicating the blessings G-d was to shower on the people for their compliance with the teachings of the Torah.

One of the blessings reads:

> "Blessed are you in the city and blessed are you in the field."

R. Yosef Chaim of Baghdad, one of the great Iraqi Jewish sages of the 19th century in his work *Aderes Eliyahu* explains that this "twin blessing" is a remarkable one. A blessing in the city, he explains, can be a problem for the field. Conversely, a blessing for the field can pose problems for the city. In an agrarian society, rain that is crucial for the crops that are in the field can be a problem for life and the resources one has in the city. To pray for rain can be a curse for one's urban interests, and to pray for no rain will bring disaster for one's interests in the field.

And here G-d promises that when we follow His commands we will be blessed simultaneously in the field as well as in the city. G-d's blessing will not be a double-edged sword. What is good for one will be good for all.

Humans are limited as to how they can balance two conflicting emotions, approaches, interests and blessings. Only G-d can unify opposite forces and enable us to do enjoy their fruits.

City and Field Metaphors

On a different level we can say that the words "city" and field" are actually metaphors (in addition to their simple meaning) for the two modes of behavior we display in our lives, in our relationships with others and with G-d.

The city is where there is a structured and institutionalized form of life as opposed to the field where there is more openness, less formality and structure.

When we deal with others, we relate to them in two distinct ways: There are formal ways of connecting to others. There are proper things to say and do in the presence of others. There are rules of etiquette. But, we all recognize, as important as these societal conventions are, a wholesome relationship requires spontaneity and informality.

A simple illustration will show how these two forms of communication are crucial for a healthy relationship. When

we meet someone we know, society expects of us to exchange greetings. We say "hello!" "How are you?" and similar salutations. And even though there is little feeling that we invest into these greetings, they are nonetheless important. If we wouldn't say them it would create resentment and make us appear to be anti-social and uncouth.

We all understand, however, that as important as these niceties are, they do not suffice. We must express ourselves in less formal ways towards others, where our feelings show.

Being blessed with the knowledge of all the rules of etiquette ("Blessed in the city") is commendable, but it is a turn off if it is restricted to simply following these conventions. It is important that we complement the "Blessings in the city" with an approach that is looser, warmer and more human—"Blessings in the field."

When we try to incorporate the informal mode into our lives, we often discover that the informalities quickly become conventions and lose their meaning. The challenge then becomes to find ways of injecting feeling and sensitivity into those existing norms even as we discover new and creative ways of transcending the conventions.

Elul and Tishrei

One a deeper spiritual level, the field and the city are expressive of the two months of Elul and Tishrei.

We are now in the month of Elul, the last month of the year, preparing for the New Year that begins on Rosh Hashanah, the first day of the month of Tishrei.

The King in the Field

Rabbi Shcnur Zalman (the founder of the Chabad Chassidic movement, whose birthday, on the 18th of Elul was celebrated this week) in his classic work, *Likkutei Torah* explains that the month of Elul relative to the month of Tishrei is analogous to the "King in the [informal setting of the] field" (Elul) and the king in his palace (Tishrei).

The Alter Rebbe describes how a king who is aloof and inaccessible to most of his nation will occasionally travel outside his capital. On his return to the palace he will go through the fields, unadorned by his royal robes, at which time, everyone can approach him and make requests of him. He greets them graciously and smiles to all without regard to their station in life. Afterwards they follow him to the capital and to his palace where they then have an opportunity to meet the king in all his glory and majesty.

The month of Elul, Rabbi Schneur Zalman explains is a month in which there are no Holy Days. And yet G-d is more accessible to everyone, precisely, because the relationship in this month is highly informal. It is also the prelude for the more formal and august relationship we have with G-d in the month of Tishrei.

To be "Blessed in the city" (on Rosh Hashanah), when we find ourselves in G-d's palace, requires that we prepare for that role in the month of Elul, when "the King is in the field." This enables us to reconnect to G-d and usher in a good and sweet New Year.

The Ultimate City

The city is also a metaphor for the city of Jerusalem, G-d's eternal city. In the imminent Messianic Age, G-d's glory will be fully revealed there—and from there the light will radiate to the rest of the world. In that setting we will see the complete fulfillment of "Blessed are you in the city."

Presently, we are in the "field"; we are still in exile, praying, hoping, waiting and expecting any moment our entry into the majestic city to be with the King in His Palace (the Holy Temple in Jerusalem).

But even as we wait, we must realize that the King is accessible to us, albeit in our simple garb; we are "Blessed in the field" as well. We must look for and see the multitude of opportunities to approach Him and ask for all

of our needs—particularly, the need to get out of exile and be one with our G-d, our people, our Land and ourselves, and through that with the rest of humanity as well.

Letters, Words and Sentences

A fourth third approach to the "city" is based on the statement of the early Kabbalistic work *Sefer Yetzirah* that letters are like bricks, words like houses and sentences etc. are like cities.

A city is thus a formal way of communicating. And a holy city is the way we communicate with G-d through prayer and Torah study. We recite words and entire prayers and by doing so we have constructed a holy city.

We beseech G-d that our prayers and Torah study should be blessed. Our words should be meaningful and accomplish their goal of G-d providing us with our needs and wants. When studying Torah we want that our study should reflect our realization and the awe it engenders that we are studying G-d's wisdom.

But there is also a more informal way of serving G-d which is "in the field." Even when we are not formally engaged in holy activities such as Torah study and prayer, but are engaged in mundane activities, we implore G-d to bless our work in the field; our work should be performed for the sake of heaven and we should "know Him in all our ways."

ESSAY FOURTEEN

KEEPING OUR HEADS ABOVE

A mind/head is a terrible thing to waste.

It is equally objectionable to keep our head immersed in things that are "down," beneath us.

ESSAY FOURTEEN

KEEPING OUR HEADS ABOVE

The Final and Ultimate Blessing?

This week's Parsha is known for the many blessings that it contains. These blessings are offered for our compliance with G-d's will. The very last blessing — which presumably indicates that it is the ultimate one — the Torah promises is:

> "G-d shall appoint you as a head and not as a tail; you shall always be above and you shall not be below."

At first glance, the Torah means that our fortunes shall rise. But, if this is all that it means, why then does the Torah repeat itself by saying first "G-d shall appoint you as a head.." and then repeat the same idea, "you shall always be above?"

We also must understand why this dual blessing was placed at the end of all the blessings, somehow suggesting that this blessing is the pinnacle?

Head and Tail: Soul and Body

Based on *Panim Yafos*, one of the early Chassidic masters, the following explanation may be offered:

The term "head" applies to the soul because it is a part of G-d Who is our head. Relative to the soul, the body, which resides in our lowly physical world, is called a "tail."

The blessing that we should be appointed as a head thus means that we should always be led by the dictates of the soul and not by the dictates of the body. When the "tail" follows the head i.e., when a person's body follows the desires and needs of the soul, it is a blessing and it leads to all other blessings.

On a deeper level, the blessing that we should follow the head and not the tail implies not only that the soul should not be subordinated and subjugated to the desires of the body, but moreover, even when the soul's desire reigns supreme, it is still important that we don't allow the body's interests to compromise the integrity of the soul.

For example, one who performs a Mitzvah, which involves the soul (the "head"), but does it for the for the purpose of showing off before others, the head has thus become subordinated to the body ("tail").

And while we should never desist from performing a Mitzvah even if we do it for ulterior motives, nevertheless, the greatest blessing is when we grow to the point that our head is independent and unaffected by the weaknesses of the body.

This is seen as one of the ultimate blessings, because there is no greater blessing than freedom. And there is no greater form of freedom than when our soul ("head") is free and unencumbered by any other inferior influences, external or internal.

Always Above

However, even that is not the pinnacle of blessing. The Torah continues that the truly ultimate blessing is when we are always "above" and not "below." This could mean that even when our head is independent and free, it can revel and become complacent in its own level of spiritual attainment.

To always be "above" implies that the person, no matter how much he or she has achieved in the spiritual realm, must always look to reach above; to always climb to greater heights of spirituality.

Now, many people can argue that everything is relative. And relative to others one might be on a higher level and that could suffice. To dispel this notion the Torah underscores that not only is it important to always strive to be above, but it is also important to never look below us and conclude that we have already achieved enough since relative to others who are below, we are above.

If we have to look below us it should be in material matters, so that we are never jealous and covetous of those

who have more than us. But for spiritual matters it is the reverse; we must always look at the one who is above us and strive to reach that level.

Exile Relativism

While we are still in exile, it is difficult if not impossible to break out of the "relativistic" notion that we can be content if we have achieved more than others. By placing this blessing at the end of the entire series of blessings, the Torah is essentially conveying to us that at the **end**, when Moshiach will usher in the period of redemption, we will see the full realization of the blessing that we shall always be a "head" and that we shall always be above in the pure non-relativistic sense

What will be true in the full sense of the word in the Messianic Era can be "sampled" even now, especially as we approach the end of the year and embark on a journey into a new year and a new and heightened level of spirituality.

May we therefore all realize these greatest blessings on the threshold of the New Year, and may we all be inscribed and sealed for a good and sweet year.

ESSAY FIFTEEN
JEWISH DOMINATION

There are many forms of domination.

One can exercise control over others or exercise control over oneself.

ESSAY FIFTEEN
JEWISH DOMINATION

Do We Want to Dominate?

One of the blessings—indeed, the very first that appears in this week's parsha— that G-d gave the Jewish people if they would follow His commandments was:

> "G-d, your G-d, will place you above all the nations of the world. And all these blessings shall come upon you..."

There are two points to ponder in this verse:

First, what does the Torah mean when it says that we are to be placed above all the nations?

If the Jewish people would have harbored a desire to dominate other nations it would have made sense that the first blessing proffered would be domination of other nations. But, as a group, Jews have never harbored such ambitions. If anything, the Jewish people, who have been dominated and persecuted by other nations, would just love to live in peace with everyone, so long as they allow us

to live freely as Jews.

Second, after it promises us that we will dominate others, the Torah follows with a more general and comprehensive blessing: "And all these blessings shall come upon you.." Usually a general and all-encompassing blessing precedes a more specific one. Yet, here, the order is reversed. First the Torah promises the specific blessing of world domination and then **all** of the blessings.

A Facilitator of All the Blessings

It may be suggested that, in fact, the blessing of "world domination" was not intended as a blessing, but as an extension of the opening phrases of this *parsha*:

> "And it will come to pass that you will listen to the voice of G-d your G-d, to keep and perform all of the commandments that I command you today."

Immediately after this introductory sentence the Torah follows with the words:

> "And G-d your G-d will place you upon all the nations of the world."

This means that the immediate effect of compliance with G-d's will is the ability to exercise control over the nations of the world. This, while not a blessing in and of itself, will make our commitment to G-d complete and **that** will lead to all of the blessings.

In other words, domination over others is not a blessing per se, but rather a consequence of the observance of all the other commandments. Conformance with G-d's will coupled with "domination" of other nations; will make us worthy of all of G-d's blessings.

We still must understand what is the meaning of world domination and why is it a consequence of observance of the commandments?

Assimilation or Inspiration?

Throughout history there have been two modes of interaction and engagement with the nations of the world in whose countries we resided. One mode is where the Jewish people, bearing the pressure of dictatorial and despotic regimes on the one hand and the assimilationist pressures on the other, allowed the values of other nations to infiltrate into the Jewish community and compromise our own values and teachings.

The other mode was where we stood above the other nations. Not in the sense of domination and the exercise of power, but as a "light unto the nations," showing them the beauty of our own traditions. Even when we were dominated by others, the Jew did not feel confined and pressured. On the contrary, the Jew felt liberated and empowered to withstand any amount of pressure.

A Matter of Choice

In truth, whether we feel free to be ourselves or compelled to be dominated by others is a matter of choice. As Viktor Frankel—the famous Holocaust survivor and psychologist—wrote, based on his Holocaust experiences, "Everything can be taken from a man but one thing: the last of the human freedoms—to choose one's own way."

These two attitudes have been alluded to by our Sages in the Midrashic explanation as to why the Jews have been likened to an olive. The first is that like an olive, we give our oil and light when we are crushed and oppressed. Second, like olive oil which doesn't mix with other fluids, we, too, remain aloof and separate from all other nations.

Our Sages have in this Midrash described the two distinct attitudes that we discussed earlier:

We are either compelled to assimilate and as a result we are either physically or spiritually crushed by the nations, or we can recognize our unique Jewish identity and stand apart from the other nations. Standing apart does not mean a desire to dominate them or discriminate against them but rather a desire to retain our own individuality and self-respect as Jews.

A Jew who chooses the standing-apart, anti-assimilation approach will find that his commitment to G-d will be enhanced, for nothing can and will stand in his way.

This then is what the Torah meant when it speaks of how

we will stand above everyone and then proceeds to enumerate the manifold blessings we will receive.

When one finds himself crushed by the prevailing fads, mores, secular and other religious cultures, notwithstanding their observance of the commandments, they cannot possibly receive all of G-d's blessings. Only a self-respecting Jew who resists the assimilationist influences and remains steadfastly committed to Torah will be able to reap and enjoy all of G-d's blessings.

Exile Mentality

There is another term for this tendency to emulate the other cultures; it is called a Galus-exile mentality.

The lack of self-respect and the tendency to emulate other cultures at the expense of our own is one of the destructive features of exile.

Our constant prayers for the Messianic Age is not just so that we will no longer be subjected to tyranny and war, but that we will also be able to gain total self-respect that will ensure the integrity of our Jewish identities. That will be real world domination.

Moreover, in the Messianic Age our influence, under the direction and leadership of Moshiach, will bring all nations of the world under the banner of one G-d, and will be faithful to the Seven Noahide Commandments. In addition, as Maimonides puts it in the very last paragraph of his

Mishneh Torah:

> "The preoccupation of the entire world will be to know G-d exclusively."

ESSAY SIXTEEN
WHITE IS NOT ALWAYS BEAUTIFUL

White is the color of purity. But a white veneer and a corrupt interior is what gets us into exile.

ESSAY SIXTEEN

WHITE IS NOT ALWAYS BEAUTIFUL

Passover before Rosh Hashanah

When a Jew would bring his first fruits to the Holy Temple in Jerusalem, he was required to recite a section of the Torah that describes the odyssey of the Israelites from Canaan to Egypt and from Egypt back to the Land of Israel.

The purpose of this recitation was to express gratitude to G-d for all that He had done for them, particularly their possession of the land which provided them with the ability to enjoy one's fruits.

This paragraph so eloquently expresses the process of servitude and emancipation that it has also been incorporated into the Haggadah text that we recite at the Passover Seder.

An Aramean Got us in Egypt

There is one verse that seems to connect two disparate events: "An Aramean (a reference to Laban, Jacob's father-in-law), tried to destroy my father, and he descended into Egypt." The implication of this statement is that as a result

of the Aramean, Laban, Jacob had to go to Egypt.

Commentators are all baffled by this juxtaposition. Nowhere in the Torah is the suffering Jacob endured at the hands of his wily father-in-law Laban given as a reason for Jacob to descend to Egypt.

Indeed, Jacob's sojourn to Egypt occurred several decades after having returned from Laban. When Jacob left Laban he had just fathered Joseph. Jacob did not come to Egypt until Joseph had already attained the post of Viceroy in Egypt at the age of 30, followed by seven years of bounty and two years of famine.

A simple calculation reveals that Jacob's descent into Egypt occurred close to forty years after he had departed from Laban. Why then does the Torah link these two events?

Laban's Switcharoo; the Culprit

One ingenious interpretation is given by the great nineteenth century German sage, R. Azriel Hildesheimer in the name of his father:

The Talmud maintains that the catalyst for the Jewish people's enslavement in Egypt was the sale of Joseph by his brothers, which was provoked by their jealousy as a result of their father's preferential treatment of him.

Had Laban not tricked Jacob and given him Leah instead of Rachel, Rachel would have, in fact, given birth to Joseph

first. Hence, Joseph would have been the actual first born Jacob would have fathered. He would then have deserved this preferential treatment as was the custom, in those days to honor a first born.

Hence it was Laban's deceptive practice that ultimately led to their enslavement in Egypt.

However, this explanation, does not suggest that there was any intrinsic relationship between Laban and Egyptian bondage.

Furthermore, why implicate Laban more than Jacob? After all, the reason Jacob had to go to Laban was to escape the wrath of his brother Esau when he took his blessings from him. So why don't we connect the bondage with Jacob, or perhaps his mother Rebecca who pushed Jacob to deceive his father?

Laban's Real Intent

In truth, there is a deeper connection between Laban and Egyptian bondage. One of Laban's statements to Jacob was:

> "The sons are my sons and the daughters are my daughters."

Ostensibly Laban meant to suggest that he was just as concerned about the well-being of his children and grandchildren as was Jacob.

The real intent of Laban, however, was that he was the true

patriarch of the family and that Jacob's wives and their children were truly **his,** not Jacobs.

The dispute between Laban and Jacob was a clash of two cultures. Laban—which means white—had a clean and pure veneer. He was indignant—after tricking Jacob—and self-righteously proclaimed:

> "In our region we don't give away the younger daughter before the older one."

Behind this cultured veneer lurked a dark, duplicitous and utterly corrupt man.

Jacob, conversely, did not always appear that cultured and pristine. Jacob was compelled to appropriate the blessings from his brother Esau. His image was certainly tarnished by this behavior. Similarly, his sons engaged in the destruction of *Shechem*—though motivated by righteous indignation in response to what was done to their sister—it even embarrassed Jacob.

However, beneath the outer appearances of Jacob and his sons was a holy and truly pure spirit. But living in a world of such immorality, deception and cruelty, they were occasionally compelled to fight that deception and violence with their own.

To the extent that Jacob and his sons were associated with Laban, Laban had some effect on them. Occasionally, we pick up negative traits and ideas just by osmosis.

Moreover, there is a well-known adage: "One who wrestles

with a dirty person will also become dirty." No matter how innocent one is, by associating with those who are impure, even to combat them, one acquires some trace of that impurity.

King Solomon declares: "I am black and beautiful." This verse, the Midrash says is not about skin color; it is about morality and righteousness.

Solomon is essentially saying, that though I appear to have a black character, I am still beautiful because my interior, my inner soul is pure.

Laban was white on the outside and black on the inside, whereas Jacob was darkened on the outside but totally white and pure on the inside.

Since Jacob and his children, represented the nascent energy of the Jewish nation, it was imperative that they be cleansed from even the slightest trace of "Labanism." Even if it was only on the surface it could not stay that way. There had to be way of cleansing.

That way was the Egyptian Bondage.

Egyptian Bondage and Current Exile: Purging Process

This then, perhaps, is what the Torah means when it connects Laban's desire to destroy my father and the descent of Jacob into Egypt. In order to get rid of the destructive association with Laban we had to go through

the refining process that we experienced in Egypt.

The prophet compares our stay in exile with that of the Egyptian experience. And while we can never understand why G-d needs to refine us through suffering and pain, the Torah informs us that exile is a refining process.

The sooner we realize the duplicitous nature of the "Laban cultures" that have given us Nazi Germany, Soviet Totalitarianism and the like, and delve into our own culture; we will hasten the process of the exodus from this exile, once and for all.

ESSAY SEVENTEEN

GET OUT OF GALUS AND BE YOUR OWN BAKER!

A liberated mindset is to ignore the marketplace of ideas and search within one's own soul and Torah teachings for guidance and inspiration.

ESSAY SEVENTEEN

GET OUT OF GALUS AND BE YOUR OWN BAKER!

Hidden Blessings!

> "Your life will hang in the balance, and you will be frightened night and day, and you will not be certain about your life."

This week's parsha contains some of the harshest threats of pain and suffering for the Jewish people if they fail to follow G-d's commandments. This verse is one.

In truth, this section, called the *Tochecha* (rebuke), can be read on two levels. On the first level these harsh admonitions sound like horrific curses intended to jolt us out of our reverie and take life seriously.

On a higher and deeper level, however, these "curses" are actually sublime, but hidden, blessings; even more powerful than any of the overt blessings in the Torah. To capture the positive dimension, one has to dig deep beneath the surface of these "curses."

How can we possibly interpret the abovementioned verse in a positive vein? How can insecurity and fear be positive attributes?

To discover a positive message in this verse we must first have a better and deeper understanding of its simple meaning.

Depending on the Market and Baker

According to Rashi, who cites the words of the Talmud (*Menachos* 103b), the fear spoken of in the first part of the verse refers to "one who buys produce from the market." The fear here is the uncertainty that is caused by not having one's own produce, having to depend solely on the market.

The next part of the verse, "you will not be certain of your life," Rashi continues, refers to "one who relies on the baker."

These fears appear to be redundant. The common denominator of these curses is that the people will not have their own produce or baked goods. Why does the Torah divide this curse into two?

Another question is, after going through over 50 grueling verses of the most horrific curses, maybe having to depend on the market and baker doesn't sound like such a potent curse.

One may answer the second question by realizing that it is doubt that makes all the other curses much more difficult to bear.

Even in times of suffering, humans have the uncanny ability to develop a tolerance for pain. But when the pain and suffering is augmented by doubt and uncertainty, it makes all the suffering much more acute and intolerable.

But the question still remains. There are far more serious doubts than the uncertainty of having to depend on markets and bakers. Almost all of modern society is relieved that they don't have to do strenuous farm work and can depend on the markets and bakers.

Spiritual Produce and Baked Goods

Perhaps the verse here actually refers to moral and spiritual produce. The curse is that we have to get it from the "outside."

There are two sources from which we can get our direction in life: It can come from the outside, from the "marketplace" of ideas or it can come from within our own teachings and from within our own souls.

This then is what the verse means when it says, "Your life will hang in the balance." Your life (spiritual life, which can then affect your physical life as well) will be insecure because you will not have direction. And the reason you will lack direction is that you depend on the "market," which is inundated with a plethora of different and conflicting messages.

Insecurity caused by the fragmentation and proliferation of ideas is the hallmark of Galus-exile. When we had our Holy Temple, in the days of King Solomon, all of the nations paid homage to him. The "marketplace" was, to a significant measure, subordinated to the principles of Torah, or, at least was bending in that direction. However, when Solomon fell into excesses and allowed the foreign influences of his wives to encroach on his turf, his Kingdom was split into two, a division that sowed the seeds of exile.

With the imminent Final Redemption, Torah will be restored as the singular influence in our lives and in the lives of all society. It will therefore be a blissful existence, free of doubts, insecurities and conflicts.

Thus, if we had to characterize the difference between exile and Redemption we could say, exile is division and Redemption is unity.

The famous Talmudic Sage, Rabbi Yoseph, celebrated the Festival of Shavuos, the anniversary of the giving of the Torah, with much excitement. The reason he offered for this celebration was: "If not for this day, there would be many Josephs in the **marketplace."** He meant that if not for the Torah he would have been one Joseph among many other Josephs. Torah made him unique.

Why did Rabbi Yoseph stress the word "marketplace?" He could have just said, "if not for this day there would have been many Josephs."

If not for the Torah we would have been compelled to sort out the bombardment of conflicting influences coming at us from all different directions in the marketplace. Our lives would always be hanging in the balance, swinging from one direction to another; never knowing which one is correct.

Given this interpretation of the verse, the curse here is not confined to the lack of certainty about one's supply of food but the uncertainty of life itself.

No Night and Day

The verse then continues to explain what this uncertainty does to us:

> "...and you will be frightened night and day."

As the next verse clarifies:

> "In the morning you will say, who can give evening, and in the evening you will say, who can give morning."

The underlying message here is that "day" and "night" represent different approaches to life. Night and day demand different modes of behavior and even dress. But, when we are exposed to the marketplace of ideas, we cannot know when to live a day life and when to live a night life. Our schedules and priorities are skewed and we cannot grow spiritually.

Believe in Yourself

The verse then continues:

> "...and you will not be certain about your life."

As mentioned, Rashi interprets this as having to depend on the baker.

The difference between a baker and the market is that the market provides us with raw material whereas the baker sells us fully baked products.

The metaphor of the baker is that while in exile we depend on the volatile and conflicted marketplace for guidance in life. This brings us great uncertainty, but it gets much worse than that. Even when we have the finished product given to us, when we have fully baked knowledge, knowledge that was generated by the heat and warmth of Torah, we will not be able to internalize it. It will feel that it is an outside influence and not home baked. It will seem alien to us.

When people feel that what they have been given is not in sync with who they are, they cannot feel satisfied.

Thus, the verse (translated literally) says:

> "You will not **believe** in your life."

You will feel empty and undernourished even by the bread of Torah. Even the tastiest of Torah pastries will not bring enjoyment because in Galus your palate has been desensitized to the culinary delights of Torah. You will not get satisfaction because Galus conditions have caused us to lose touch with our souls. Moreover, even the Torah that we are able to learn may be tainted with Galus vision.

For us to get the most from Torah we have to feel that we have a soul, that it is in the right place and that the Torah is indeed ours. But when we are suffused with such self-doubt, all the nourishment that comes from the Torah will not fulfill us and it will not allow us to escape from Galus.

On the Threshold

We have now arrived at a positive way of viewing this verse because the Torah has essentially provided us with the diagnosis of our problem. Simply knowing the root cause of our malady is half the cure.

When we know that doubts in our lives stem from our insistence on getting our knowledge, values and ideologies from the marketplace, from the world of Galus-exile, all we have to do is turn to the one unifying influence: the Torah and the way it will dominate the imminent period of Geulah-Redemption.

As mentioned in many of these essays, the Hebrew word for Redemption is the same as the word for exile, except

that it has an added letter *aleph*, which means one. The world of Redemption is a world of oneness and unity.

The Rebbe informed us repeatedly that we are standing on the "threshold of Redemption."

What does the imagery of standing on a threshold suggest?

Look Inside!

We can either direct our gaze inward so we see the Geulah in front of us or we can turn our backs and see things through the prism of exile, even as we are but millimeters away from Geulah. This verse implores us not to get our vision from the exile marketplace.

Furthermore, the difference between exile and redemption is that exile is a state of alienation from ourselves, from our very souls, whereas in Redemption we shall be in touch with our souls. In that state of Galus-produced alienation, even fully baked pastries of Torah and Chassidus do not satisfy our needs.

To get out of exile, we have to "bake our own bread and cakes." We have to believe in our own souls. We cannot rely solely on G-d's promise to schlep us out of the quagmire of Galus; we have our own important part to play. We must ignite our souls and invest the heat and fire of our souls in the performance of Mitzvos and passion for Moshiach.

The Torah beckons us: Look inside the world of Geulah; look inside your own soul and you'll discover unity!

ESSAY EIGHTEEN

COPPER AND IRON

Copper and Iron are metaphors for substances that express an inferior spiritual state.

But they also represent the ideal of yearning for higher goals and total transformation.

ESSAY EIGHTEEN

COPPER AND IRON

Blessings in Disguise

The most striking feature of this week's parsha is the *to'cha'cha.* At face value, it contains Moses' very harsh threat of Divine retribution for future transgressions. Some of the most horrific curses are mentioned in this section.

The Rebbe explains that G-d identifies with and gives us only blessings. However, we were given the freedom to choose whether to accept these blessings or to convert them into curses. Our positive actions empower us to be receptive to these positive energies, whereas negative behavior can transform the blessings into their opposite.

Moreover, Chassidic tradition, based on the Talmud and Zohar, maintains that these curses are actually blessings in disguise. There are two forms of Divine blessing:

The first category is the blessing that is limited in scope and can easily be accessed. There is, however, a second category of blessing which is so potent that it cannot be verbally expressed and it manifests itself in a negative fashion under the façade of an ostensible curse.

To access this elusive dimension of Divine beneficence we must wait until the Era of Redemption. Only at that time, will we be able to absorb the powerful energy these hidden blessings radiate.

Moreover, in the Messianic age of transformation, we will be able to convert all past negativity into unprecedented blessings.

Based on this premise, many Chassidic Masters have reinterpreted the *to'cha'cha* in a positive vein. In this essay we will attempt to demonstrate how an extremely severe curse can be interpreted in a positive "Moshiach-oriented" manner. And, as we shall see, this verse (Devarim 28:23) actually alludes to the transformative power of the Messianic Age:

> "Your heavens over your head will be copper and the land beneath you will be iron."

If this curse were to materialize as written, the heavens would cease to give their rain and the earth would be so dry and hardened that it would fail to yield any produce. In short, a devastating famine would ensue.

How can this dire threat possibly be interpreted in a positive vein?

The Four Metals

To reinterpret this verse we must analyze the symbolic meanings of its key words: "copper" and "iron."

"Copper" and "iron" are mentioned in conjunction with the construction of the Mishkan-Tabernacle and the Bais Hamikdash, respectively.

With respect to the Mishkan, the portable Sanctuary that traveled with the Jewish nation in the desert, the Torah refers to the three metals used in its construction: "Gold, silver and copper." All three were needed to make this portable Sanctuary a place which would reveal G-d's presence to the world. In the subsequent Sanctuaries these three metals were also key components.

Iron, on the other hand, was not used in the construction of any of the Temples. The reason for the objection to iron is that weapons were crafted from it. And since the Temple is designed to enhance our lives and iron is used to shorten them, it would be incongruous to build a life-sustaining structure with a reminder of its very antithesis.

However, the Rebbe (Sefer HaSichos, 5752, volume 2 p. 233) argues that in the Third Temple, iron will be used liberally. The prohibition against using iron to construct the Bais Hamikdash will no longer apply in the Messianic Age, when we will enjoy eternal life. Iron will no longer be capable of shortening life and will no longer be a symbol of death and destruction.

Four Historical Periods

The Rebbe explains that the four metals (gold, silver, copper and iron) can serve as metaphors for four mindsets and four historical periods associated with the Holy Temples:

"Gold" symbolizes the First Temple Era, in which G-d's presence was more pronounced than in the Second Temple Era.

Moreover, the Hebrew word for gold *zahav* is said to be an acronym for the words, "*zeh hanosain bari*-this is the one who gives in a state of health." This alludes to those who give to G-d or to others when they are in a state of perfect health. In this ideal state, their giving takes on **golden** form. Similarly, in the First Temple Era spirituality was in its ideal state of health. Gold represents the spiritually elite.

"Silver" connotes the Second Temple Era. In that period, the Temple lacked the capacity to channel the Divine to the world. The Talmud states that five essential things were missing in the Second Temple, which alluded to the compromised state of G-dly revelation in comparison with the First Temple.

Moreover, the Hebrew word for silver "*kesef*" is said to be an acronym for "*k'sheyesh sacanas pachad*-when there is a fear of mortal danger." This alludes to those who give when they feel threatened and vulnerable. This aptly describes the Second Temple Era, when the compromised state of

spirituality raised the concern that the Temple might be destroyed. It represents the person who is at a heightened state of spirituality but risks faltering and degenerating.

"Copper," the Rebbe asserts, represents the period of *galus*-exile. We are bereft of the Bais Hamikdash and beseech G-d to give us the far superior Third Temple, a Sanctuary for eternity. The Hebrew world for copper, *nechoshes*, is an acronym for "*nesinas choleh k'she'amar t'nu*-when an ailing person says 'give'." This describes a state of affairs where the Jewish people are spiritually ill and ask G-d to give them the Third Temple, which will restore them to health and vitality.

One may suggest that inasmuch as the focus of the "copper" state of exile is on our illness due to the absence of the Bais Hamikdash and our concomitant longing for the Third Temple, copper is therefore associated with Moshiach. According to the Ba'al Shem Tov's teaching, a person's location is where that person's will is. When our prayers focus on Moshiach and the Redemption, that's where we truly are. Indeed, it has been pointed out that the root of the word *nechoshes* is *nachash*, which has the same numerical value as the word Moshiach.

"Iron," the Rebbe continues, will become a symbol of strength and endurance. It therefore represents the Third Bais Hamikdash, which will be an eternal structure. Unlike the two Temples of the past that were destroyed, the Third

Temple, constructed by G-d Himself, cannot possibly be destroyed.

Transformation

Copper and iron are both symbols of the Messianic Age. The difference is that copper represents the desire and longing for Moshiach and the Third Bais Hamikdash, while iron represents the actualization of this desire.

Copper and iron share another Messianic feature. As stated, the root of the word *nechoshes* is *nachash*, which means serpent and, as stated above, has the numerical value of the word Moshiach. How do we reconcile these diametrically opposite connotations?

Kabbalists and Chassidic masters explain that this paradox is precisely what the Messianic Age is all about. It will transform the evil of the *nachash* into goodness and holiness.

Likewise, iron, which symbolized the opposite of life during prior eras, becomes a most significant part of the Bais Hamikdash in the Messianic Age, during which it will endure forever. Here too, we see the transformation of total destruction and devastation caused by iron into utter and ultimate immortality.

Reinterpretation

We can now approach the verse with which we began this discussion and reinterpret it in a positive and spiritual vein:

> "Your heavens over your head will be copper and the land beneath you will be iron."

"Heaven" is generally understood to be a metaphor for the spiritual realm and "land" is the metaphor for the physical.

This "blessing in disguise" alludes to the last days of exile, symbolized by "copper." In this period, our heavenly desires will be "over your head." The "head" symbolizes the human being's highest faculty of reason and intellect. Our craving for the Messianic Age will transcend our understanding, consonant with the statement of the Talmud that "Moshiach will come when our minds are distracted from it." This, the Alter Rebbe explains, does not mean, G-d forbid, that we should forget about Moshiach. On the contrary, we must yearn for his coming every day, as we state explicitly in our prayers thrice daily. Rather, it means that our desire for Moshiach should go beyond that which our minds can comprehend. It should be "over our head." We must learn about Moshiach and Redemption to the extent our minds can fathom and then recognize that there is much that remains beyond our understanding. That realization will engender a heightened sense of passion that goes beyond the passion our rational thoughts can generate.

The second part of the verse continues: "...and the land beneath you will be iron." "Land" implies our physical

existence. Moreover, the word in Hebrew "*erets*" connotes desire, and the phrase "beneath you" suggests our most base desires that are beneath the norm and are the cause of our destructive behavior. However, in the Messianic Age, all of the formerly destructive forces will be transformed into the positive and powerful force of iron, which will bring about total and permanent holiness in this world.

ESSAY NINETEEN

THE INDIVIDUAL AND THE COVENANTAL

Today is the most important day of your life.

Today is the day we receive the Torah as it was given the first day.

There is an individual "today" and a communal "today."

ESSAY NINETEEN

THE INDIVIDUAL AND THE COVENANTAL

Today!

There are two places in this week's parsha where the Torah stresses the importance of seeing the Torah's timelessness; how it relevant today as it was the first day we received it.

In the first instance, the Torah states:

> "**Today** G-d, your G-d, is commanding you to fulfill these commands and judgments. Be careful to observe them, with all your heart and with all your soul. **Today,** you have selected G-d to be your G-d, to go in His ways, and to observe His statutes, His commandments and His judgments, and to listen to His voice. And **today** G-d has selected you to be His treasured people—as He told you—and to observe all His commandments..."

The introductory word "Today" appears superfluous. The Torah could have simply stated: "Your G-d has commanded you etc." Rashi in anticipation of this question states:

> "Each and every day they shall be new in your eyes as if you were commanded to observe them this very day."

In other words, the Torah is not content that we observe G-d's commandments. We must also observe them as we would if this would have been the very first day we were commanded to do them.

In just a few verses later, the Torah states essentially the same message:

> "Moses and the priests (from the tribe of) Levi spoke to all of Israel, saying, 'Pay attention and listen, O Israel! *Today*, you have become a people to G-d, your G-d. Listen to the voice of G-d, your G-d. Perform His commandments and His statutes, which I am commanding you **today**.'"

Here too, Rashi comments on the words: "**Today** you have become" and explains: "Each and every day they shall be in your eyes as if you have this very day entered into the covenant with Him."

The question arises why the Torah repeats the same lesson about the eternal relevance of the Torah.

A second question can be raised. Why is it that in the first selection it speaks of the importance of observing the Mitzvos first, followed by a statement of how we are G-d's nation, whereas in the second selection the order is reversed? First it speaks of how we became G-d's nation,

and after that it refers to our obligation to follow His commandments.

Two Messages

In truth, these two selections represent two different messages to the Jewish people and the way they should view the timelessness of Torah. And these two messages reflect two distinct approaches we must take towards our Judaism.

The first approach is to view Judaism as a way of life that G-d has given us to give us direction in life. Every Mitzvah we do enlightens, inspires and sanctifies us. Each individual Mitzvah cements our personal relationship with G-d. As a result of our individual observance of these G-dly acts we then come together to form and mold a G-dly society; a G-dly nation.

But which comes first?

It is the individual commitment to following the individual commandments that creates a bond between each individual and His G-d, which comes first. What follows individual commitment is a nation borne out of and fashioned by holy individuals that share a common way of living.

This is what the first selection focuses on. We are to remember that even as individuals we have a responsibility

to follow the dictates of the Torah and by doing so we create a vibrant and cohesive nation.

When the Torah was given on Mount Sinai, G-d addressed every Jew individually. Thus the Ten Commandments are written in the singular form to underscore the individual connection G-d makes with each and every one of us.

Chassidic philosophy explains that when G-d stated the fateful words at Sinai: "I am G-d **your** [in the singular form] G-d..." G-d "implanted" Himself and became the dynamic force of every individual Jew.

This experience was so powerful that it would be very difficult for the individual to not be inspired to fulfill all of the commandments. The difficulty to abandon it is further buttressed by virtue of the fact that G-d's nature became our essential nature. To sin is to go against your own nature.

G-d, however, also gave us free choice, which allows us to go against our nature. He also gave us an evil inclination that seeks to cloud the innate connection we have with G-d.

As long as we were under the influence of Sinai, we were safe. However, as we moved away from that epiphany, and especially after the Golden Calf debacle (instigated by the outside influence of the *Eirev Rav-the* multitude of nations that joined the Jewish people for the wrong reason and

who were not receptive to the Divine revelation at Sinai), the intensity of the revelation wears off.

Particularly, as time progressed, the effect of the initial revelation would wear off. To this end, the Torah exhorts us here to imagine as if we have received the Torah today. G-d, who is timeless, connects to us on a daily basis. When we reflect on the fact that we never really lost that inner connection established at Sinai, we can refresh that experience.

National Identity

The second selection, however, addresses a totally different approach to Judaism. Here the focus is on the national identity we acquired when we entered into the covenant. This relationship is not based on our individual lives and the commitments we make as individuals; this relationship is created by a covenant that "bound" G-d to us and we to Him regardless of His or our behavior.

History has painfully demonstrated that the Jewish nation as a people never abandoned G-d even when it appeared that He abandoned us. Conversely, even when it seemed that we had forsaken G-d by neglecting to keep His commandments, G-d still preserved us and blessed us.

Indeed, our very existence today is nothing short of a miracle of Biblical proportions, rivaling and perhaps even surpassing the miracle of the splitting of the Sea of Reeds!

But, our covenant with G-d, though it initiated a reciprocal and unconditional relationship with Him, does indeed obligate us to follow His commandments. How can we say no to a G-d Who has so inextricably bound Himself to us? How can we not follow His commandments when we made our destiny intertwined with His? If we are His people, how could we not behave as such?

Thus in the second selection the emphasis is placed on the covenant between G-d and nation Israel, from which flows the need to follow His commandments, the reverse of the first selection where the commandments create a national identity.

But, as in the first instance of our individual role, the passage of time can erode some of the ardor that existed when we entered the covenant for the first time.

The Torah therefore exhorts us that we should reflect daily on the fact that the covenant is renewed every day.

Thus far we have seen that our observance for the commandments comes from two different directions: Form our individual role and from our role as part of the "Covenantal Community."

Two Dimensional Request for Redemption

When we ask G-d in our daily prayers to bring Moshiach and the final Redemption, it is also based on the two aforementioned considerations.

We come before the A-mighty and ask Him to bring Moshiach because as **individuals** we have earned it. We have kept the commandments. As individuals committed to Judaism, we forged a national identity as a people committed to basic morality, holiness and goodness. And even when it appeared that our connection to the past would wane, we saw the resurgence of Judaism; and in many instances with the same fervor and devotion as if it were given that very day.

Moreover, our positive behavior rubbed off on other nations who have adopted many of our ethical Biblical traditions. As Maimonides writes, the entire world is now filled with discussion about the commandments, which will prepare the world for the coming of Moshiach when the entire world will conform to G-d's will. (Jews will fully observe the 613 commandments and non- Jews will follow the Seven Noahide Commandments.)

But, in addition to the above, we can and must also approach G-d in our request for the Redemption on the basis of our national identity that was created by the covenant we entered that transcends even the fidelity to our individual obligations.

On Yom Kippur we recite:

> "We are your people and You are our G-d, we are your children and You are our Father,"

And as His people we are entitled to be redeemed!

ESSAY TWENTY

HEALTHY INSANITY

Insanity is not a pejorative if we transcend our intellect rather than go beneath it.

Some of the most successful people who changed the face of the earth were regarded as crazy.

We applaud that craziness when it gets us ready for Moshiach!

ESSAY TWENTY

HEALTHY INSANITY

Preparing for the New Year with Tough Love?

One of the most difficult sections of the Torah is clearly the recitation of the 98 horrific consequences of sinful behavior, known as the "*tochecha,"* that appears in this week's parsha. These were an expression of G-d's "tough love"; intended to jolt the Jewish people, as they were poised to enter the Promised Land, into compliance with G-d's will.

According to the Talmud, we are supposed to read this section of the Torah at the end of the year, as we prepare to enter the New Year. The end of the year parallels the end of the Jewish people's preparation for their entry into a new land.

Upon reflection, this approach appears problematic, We can understand why a repeat offender, who is reprimanded politely and affectionately but who nevertheless continues in his sinful ways, must be reprimanded more harshly. If the approach of love doesn't work we are permitted to use tough love. But why would we want to begin a New Year

or enter a new land on the basis of such a negative approach?

Hidden Blessings

Chassidic thought takes a different view of these "curses." They are curses only when viewed externally; when viewed on a deeper level, they are powerful, unrestricted blessings.

By reading these hidden blessings before the onset of the New Year, we expose ourselves to infinite blessings. We have been given the free choice to unleash the hidden energy of these blessings and transform the New Year into a year of unprecedented goodness.

When Father Reads, I hear only Blessings

This transformative understanding is reflected in a story told of Rabbi Dovber, (known as the Mitteler Rebbe, the son and successor of Rabbi Schneur Zalman of Liadi, the founder of the Chabad movement) in his youth. On one occasion, he fainted when he heard the *tochecha* and remained ill for weeks. The harsh words were too much for his delicate and sensitive soul. When asked why he had not reacted so strongly to the *tochecha* in the past, he replied: "In the past I heard the reading from my father. And when my father reads them, I hear only blessings..."

When we read the *tochecha* from the vantage point of our Father in Heaven, we hear powerful but sweet words of goodness. It takes, however, the spiritual stature of a Rebbe to guide us to the inner meaning of the *tochecha.*

Notwithstanding the fact that these hidden blessings did not materialize in the past, we are guaranteed that they will ultimately be realized in the Messianic Age.

Thus, before the end of the year—which symbolizes the very end of our stay in exile pending the imminent arrival of Moshiach and the final Redemption—we read of these hidden blessings and eagerly anticipate their coming to fruition.

With this introduction in mind, many Chassidic masters have demonstrated how some of the verses that sound like curses can and should be interpreted as sublime blessings,

In that spirit, we will attempt to reinterpret one of the verses in the *tochecha*:

The Destructive Power of our Eyes

> "You will go insane from the things your eyes will see."

Understood literally, Moses was describing the utter devastation that would cause those who beheld it to lose their wits.

Some interpret this verse figuratively, asserting that what would cause us to lose our minds would be the obsessive following after our eyes. When we become hedonists and follow the dictates of our eyes and the unbridled desires of our hearts that they arouse, we lose touch with reality and become *meshuga*.

Others interpret this verse metaphorically, arguing that the "eyes" refer to the leaders, who are called "the eyes of the community." In this view, the leaders will be so corrupt that they will cause us to lose our minds.

The Good *Meshuga*

However, from a Chassidic perspective, this same verse can be seen in an entirely different and positive light.

In the original Hebrew, the term used for "insane" in this verse is *meshuga,* a pungent but useful adjective which has even made its way into the English dictionary and popular usage. Although *meshuga* is generally considered a pejorative term, is also used Biblically to denote a prophet, a person of superior vision. This descriptive term is shared by the truly insane and the prophets because people in both categories deviate from the norm, albeit in opposite directions.

Another term associated with *meshuga* is *shtus*, which contains the dual meaning of folly and deviation. Chassidic thought explains that there are two ways one can deviate

from the norm, leading to two forms of *shtus*-folly and two types of individuals, both of whom are called *meshuga.*

A person can be labeled *meshuga* when behaving in an irrational and self-destructive manner. But, likewise, one who behaves in a supra-rational fashion, who goes beyond the norm in goodness and devotion to G-d, also can be accorded the title *meshuga*.

A prophet would be given this title because he or she goes beyond the conventions of society and rises above the spiritual norm in order to be receptive to G-d's communication.

Removing the Garments

This explains what appears to be a bizarre ritual that a prophet would follow before receiving his prophecy. We are told (1 Samuel 19:24) that King Saul removed his garments as a prerequisite to receiving prophetic inspiration.

Chassidic thought explains that garments, in the literal sense of the word, became a necessity as a result of the sin of the Tree of Knowledge. When Adam and Eve partook of its fruit, they entered the world of sensuality which necessitated that they cover parts of their bodies.

Clothing which covers the body is also a metaphor for the concealment and obscuring of the Divine reality and the emergence of a new, corporeal reality, which resulted from

Adam and Eve's transgression. Had they not sinned, there would have been no need for modesty; every aspect of human biology would have been viewed as part of a Divine scheme for existence and not as an outlet for physical and sensual desires.

On a deeper level, the garments removed by the prophet symbolized his own intellect and emotions. He had to transcend their confining aspects and detach himself from the subjective sensations of his mind and heart to be receptive to G-d's presence.

The prophet, therefore, sheds his clothing, literally and figuratively, to demonstrate that he has put aside his preoccupation with material matters and no longer allows his physical needs and perceptions to dominate. Only then would he become receptive to the Divine communication.

In short, a prophet had to deviate from the human norm and rise to a higher level, which he manifested by removing of his garments in both the spiritual and physical senses. This gave him the appearance of a *meshuga*, someone who deviates from the norm.

The Torah thus tells us in its coded blessing: "You will go *meshuga*-insane from the things your eyes will see." A time will come when you will transform the negative form of insanity that derives from being a slave to passion and allowing yourself to be driven **beneath** the path of decency and normalcy, into a positive form of insanity. You will become self-transcendent beings, who rise above the norm.

Seeing and Not Just Hearing

How does this transformation occur?

The Torah gives the answer in the concluding words of this verse: "...from the things your eyes will see."

When we begin to visualize the Divine and understand it, rather than just hear about it, it motivates and empowers us to transform ourselves.

We are told that the Messianic Age will change the way we relate to G-d and spirituality. Whereas in the past we were exposed to the teachings of Torah through the medium of our ears, as the words "*Shema Yisroel*-Hear O Israel" indicate, Moshiach will teach us Torah through the medium of vision. The prophet declares: "And the glory of G-d shall be revealed and all flesh shall see that the mouth of G-d has spoken."

One of the salient differences between hearing/understanding and seeing is that when we grasp something based on hearing, the information is integrated piecemeal. Even when we hear and grasp the entire subject, it is based on separate pieces of information that we hear over a span of time. When we visualize something, by contrast, we see the entire picture all at once. The difference is qualitative and the visual experience can be transformational.

The revelation of G-dliness that initiates the Messianic Age will enable us to rise above the norm, and experience the positive and holy form of insanity; one that inspires us to do unconventional acts of kindness and goodness.

The transformation from the lower, negative form of insanity into the upper, positive form of insanity is occurring right now. We are on the cusp of the Messianic Age, straddling the fence between the darkness and confusion of exile and the light and clarity of Redemption. We are witnesses now to the paradoxical combination of both darkness and light. The darkness we see now is arguably greater than ever before and the light is also more intense than ever before.

On the one hand, we are seeing the breakdown of morality and the utter loss of decency and normalcy. Immorality has become pervasive and "in your face" in today's world. All the institutions of society are riddled with corruption. Yet, we are also witness to an extraordinary outpouring of tzedakah and compassion for those who are in need. There are many people performing acts of random kindness to counter the ubiquitous random acts of violence.

In addition, the explosion of spiritual knowledge brought on by the widespread teaching of Chassidus, with its focus on G-dly reality, has given us a foretaste of what is to come in terms of visualizing G-dliness.

As we near the end of our journey in exile, the entire picture comes into focus. We are also, therefore, witnessing

the desired result of this explosion: so many more people than ever before are experiencing "insanity" in its most positive and felicitous form.

ESSAY TWENTY-ONE

SERVING *WITH* YOUR ENEMY

The most meaningful blessing is when we know that our erstwhile enemy has become our friend.

All of the material aspects of life including our bodies may seem to be our adversaries.

Our mission is to harness them to work for the common cause together.

ESSAY TWENTY-ONE SERVING *WITH* YOUR ENEMY

Revealed and Hidden Blessings

The harshest words of rebuke in the Torah can be found in this week's parsha. The Talmud states that it is read before Rosh Hashanah, but interrupted by another parsha. This tells us that all of the year's curses, including the curse of continued Galus-exile, shall cease and a new year of blessing, particularly, the final Redemption, shall commence. We pray, hope and are confident that G-d will bring an end to all of the past negatives and that the forthcoming year will be, exclusively, one of blessing.

We cannot be content to ask only for the cessation of all the curses; we must also request that they be transformed into blessings.

Moreover, Chassidus teaches us—based on a story in the Talmud—that these curses are indeed sublime and hidden blessings. When we ask for the end and transformation of the curses we are actually asking G-d to reveal their hidden dimension.

Many Torah commentators have demonstrated how we can reinterpret some of these harsh verses in ways that expose their hidden meaning as profound blessings:

In that spirit let us attempt to discover the hidden blessings in the following verse:

> "And you shall serve your enemy whom G-d shall send against you, in hunger and in thirst, in nakedness and in want of all things; and he shall put a yoke of iron upon your neck until he will have destroyed you."

Helping Your Donkey

The phrase "you shall serve your enemy" can be understood in a positive light. Between the words "serve" and "your enemy" is the Hebrew word *es,* which though not usually translated, is often understood to mean "with." We can now restate the phrase as: "And you shall serve **together** with your enemy."

This thought echoes the teaching of the Ba'al Shem Tov (whose 318th birthday we observed this week, on Chai-18th of Elul):

It is written:

> "When you will see the donkey of your enemy collapsing under its burden, and you are inclined to

> refrain from aiding him, you shall nevertheless aid him." (Sh'mos 23:5)

The Baal Shem Tov applied this moral instruction to the body (*chamor*, "donkey", also means "materiality"). Initially, you may see your body as your enemy, resisting your soul's objectives, collapsing under the "burden" of the Mitzvos. You may therefore be inclined to fight the body by denying its needs and mortifying it. Says the Torah: You must aid your soul's "enemy." Purify the body, refine it, but do not break it. Work *with* it.

When the Torah adds that this is the enemy "whom G-d shall send against you" it implies that G-d Himself makes the marriage between our G-dly soul and our body. Don't look at your body as something working against you; it was given to you specifically to work with your soul.

The import of this teaching is that we have to recognize that our perceived enemy is not truly our enemy but is waiting for us to harness its energy to that of our soul. Together they form a formidable team.

The Superiority of the Body

When we serve G-d in a bifurcated manner - by being spiritual at times such as Shabbos or during prayer, but leaving our bodies out of it - we can only access a revealed blessing. But when we engage our body in our spiritual pursuits and work with what we thought of as our enemy,

we can reach an elusive and more sublime G-dly blessing. Chassidic thought teaches us that the source of the physical body is actually higher than that of the soul.

This explains why, according to Nachmanides and the consensus of Kabbalists and Chassidic masters, the ultimate reward for the soul will be to reside within the body after the Resurrection of the Dead. Even those souls that have reposed for millennia in the highest realms of paradise, basking in G-d's light, unhindered by the physical world, will then experience an even more transcendent aspect of G-dliness, which eludes us now.

Source of Complete Joy

This verse follows one in which the Torah describes the reason for all misery; it is when we don't serve G-d with joy.

It maybe suggested that the verse about serving **with** our erstwhile enemy is the way to restore true joy. The reason a person does not serve G-d with joy is that the body is left out of the spiritual experience of the soul. Only the soul feels nurtured, inspired and uplifted. The body's lack of interest drags the person down so that even the soul's joy is marred.

There is a parable attributed to the Ba'al Shem Tov about a prisoner who receives a letter from his father and wants to dance, which his jailors forbid. So he gives them alcohol

and they begin to dance in their intoxicated state, while the prisoner is free to dance because he received a letter from his father.

Our soul must work in concert with the body to experience true joy. Indeed, the body will also feel the joy that the soul feels because, deep down, even the physical body and the Animal Soul want to conform to G-d's will.

Where can we find evidence that the body can be receptive of the soul? And where do we see that the soul desires a relationship with the body?

The answer comes in the next few words of the verse:

Gourmet Soul Food

"...In Hunger and in Thirst."

Why does the body feel hunger and thirst?

The Ba'al Shem Tov taught that the soul is hungry and thirsty for the G-dly sparks in the food. They are of such a sublime nature that the soul cannot access them without the physical act of eating and drinking.

This tells us two things:

First, the soul needs and craves an association with the body. It is the only way it can get "gourmet" soul food. The sparks of holiness embedded in the physical derive from a higher source than that of the spiritual. Thus, the soul

craves to engage with the body in the act of eating and drinking to extract and absorb the spark. Without the body there would be no eating and drinking and therefore no access to the Divine sparks.

Second, the fact that the hunger and thirst of the soul is detected and manifested by the body proves that the body is, in no small way, receptive to and in sync with the soul.

What, one may ask, about the most evil people whose bodies are clearly out of sync with their souls but who have hearty appetites?

To afford free choice to all people, everyone must be endowed with the same physical and physiological tendencies. But the root of the body's hunger is its G-d created propensity to be receptive to the soul unless a person acts in ways that grossly corrupt the body.

The Soul's Need for Garments and Stuff

"...in nakedness"

Even the need for garments for the body and our natural state of modesty is based on the needs of the soul. Garments bring dignity to the person who wears them. Dignity is not initially something the body craves; a baby has no interest in clothing and the dignity it provides. One must mature to be able to appreciate the need and benefit of clothing. This happens when the soul has made some

inroads into the body and makes it feel the need for modesty and dignity.

The sense of nakedness and the need to be clothed is the body's reflexive response to the needs and wants of the soul.

Why do most people hunger to acquire things? No animal seeks to accumulate stuff for its own sake. It will hoard only what it needs for survival but not real-estate, jewelry, money and other stuff, in ever increasing amounts.

This hunger is deeply rooted in the soul's desire to transform the world around us. We were placed here to conquer and rule the earth. Conquest in this context means to transform our environment into a place where G-d's presence can be felt; a place where G-d can reside.

A human's body has a natural desire to accumulate property because it is responding to the soul's desire to conquer the world in a G-dly way. Here too we see the potential that soul and body have to work together.

This too is alluded to in the next phrase of the verse:

"...and in want of all things;"

So far the verse has focused on bodily needs that parallel and to some extent reflect our soul's needs. The hidden blessing here is that the soul and body will enjoy a blissful and harmonious relationship.

Iron on our Necks

The grim conclusion of the verse points to a much different aspect of the body, that seems without redeeming value because it is totally against everything the soul stands for:

> "...and he shall put a yoke of iron upon your neck until he will have destroyed you."

This refers to the basest aspect of the body, when it becomes rebellious and wages war with the G-dly soul. Iron is a potent symbol of destruction. It is the only material that was not permitted to be used in constructing the Holy Temple because its very nature alludes to bloodshed. In the worst-case scenario the soul feels the full weight of the mortal body and its Animal Soul crushing its neck, the nexus of the mind and the heart, the two most important parts of our personality with which we serve G-d.

Even this base aspect of the body and the Animal soul is not truly a hindrance to working with the G-dly soul. The hidden blessing here is that the G-dly soul takes the iron yoke and turns it around to use it in the creation of the Third Bais Hamikdash, in which iron will be used unlike its two predecessors. The hidden blessing of iron will be revealed in all of its glory!

ESSAY TWENTY-TWO

L'CHAIM-TO LIFE!

Life begins when our egos diminish and we unite with others.

Great Jewish leaders unify us because they instill the true inner life of Torah into our lives.

ESSAY TWENTY-TWO

L'CHAIM-TO LIFE!

Chai Elul

This Shabbos occurs on the 18th of Elul, known as Chai Elul. This is a day that carries much significance, inasmuch as it is the birthday of the Ba'al Shem Tov, the founder of the Chassidic movement, 318 years ago, and of Rabbi Schneur Zalman of Liadi, the "Alter Rebbe," the founder of the Chabad branch of the Chassidic movement, 271 years ago. That these two saintly leaders were born of the 18th day of the month of Elul tells us something about their contribution to the Jewish people.

It is well known that the number 18 in Hebrew is indicated by the letters *ches* and *yud*, together they form the word *chai*, which means life. It has been suggested that these two luminaries instilled life into the Jewish people in unprecedented ways through their innovative teachings and approach.

What this means in simple terms is that the Chassidic movement—of which these two rabbi were founders and leaders —did not change Judaism. What they did was to

instill new life into it. This they did by exposing its inner soul; unleashing the true and vital nature of Judaism.

Hidden Blessings

One verse in this week's parsha may help us to understand the nature of these great leaders and how they so profoundly affected the Jewish people.

In this week's parsha, Moses utters the worst curses to the people in the event that they turn away from G-d's commandments. Chassidic Masters averred that, in essence, these curses are "hidden blessings," the full import of which will become manifest in the Messianic Age.

Our efforts today at doing good—and thereby converting the curses in our lives and in the world around us into blessings—are the forces that will help us unleash the positive energy from these otherwise frightening predictions. It can be compared to nuclear energy, which can either be used as man's most lethal weapon or harnessed for incredible good. It depends on our intentions.

Unmentionable

In one verse, the Torah speaks of how G-d will bring upon the people a "plague that is not written in this Torah." Following that, Moses continues, "You will remain few in number."

There are two things here that we must try to understand:

First, what is the meaning of a "plague that is not written in this Torah?"

Second, why is the effect of this plague—that we will remain few in number—not mentioned in connection with other devastating calamities that would surely drastically reduce our numbers?

According to the Midrash, the "unwritten curse" refers to the death of righteous Torah scholars and leaders.

Some commentators explain that the righteous leaders of the Jewish people about which this verse refers were the transmitters of the Oral Torah. The Oral Torah represents the parts of the Torah that were handed down to Moses at Sinai and were transmitted orally until they were finally put into writing in the Talmud. With the death of these teachers the smooth transmission of Torah would be affected.

Hence the plague is described as one that "was not written in the Torah," referring to the loss of those who taught the oral teachings of Judaism; the teachings that were not written in the Torah.

Decline of Oral Torah; Diminution of Jewish People

We can now understand why their death leads to the diminution of the number of the Jewish people. Whenever

we lose the knowledge of Judaism because the transmitters of Torah are no longer with us—either because they left us, or we lost contact with them—the Jewish people lose touch with the teachings of the Torah and their numbers dwindle.

We are tragically witnessing the loss of Jews through assimilation these last few centuries. And in most cases it is directly attributable to their lack of knowledge of the Torah, particularly the oral traditions.

The Unifying Force

But there is a deeper way of understanding the connection between the demise of the righteous leaders and why their passing causes the diminution of the Jewish people. And it is this dimension of their lives that will help us understand the significance of the day of Chai/life Elul.

When people are alive they possess a force that not only enables them to function as a living entity, but this force/soul also unifies all parts of their beings into one organic whole.

A dead person's limbs can also be moved and made to function, but there are obviously two things missing: First, these movements are not voluntary. Second, the various parts that are moved are moved independently of each other.

A living person's entire body, by contrast, is one cohesive whole where all parts work in concert with each other in a voluntary fashion.

When the Jewish people are without proper leadership, they are as a nation that consists of so many disparate entities that are only marginally connected to each other. It is thus only when we speak of the soul of the Jewish nation, represented by its true spiritual leaders, that we can talk of it as a living nation that consists of many cohesive and interdependent parts.

In other words, when we sense disunity and distance between one Jew and another, we become a very small nation, qualitatively and also quantitatively. We cannot then all be counted as part of the same nation because we lack that which binds us together as a nation.

It's only when there is a coordinating force that sees the underlying unity of all Jews that makes us a great and numerous people. It is the soul factor that we possess—and the spiritual leaders recognize, cultivate and reveal that enables us to be viewed as one nation that consists of multiple parts all working together.

In doing so we create this incredible mosaic, which is, simultaneously, the most unified piece of art because it consists of so many multitudinous and diverse hues and shapes.

Gave Life, Unity and Increased their Numbers

When these righteous leaders' souls are introduced to the world they serve not only as leaders, teachers and mentors. If they did only that, their contributions to the people would still be formidable. But the greatest spiritual leaders—such as the Ba'al Shem Tov and the Alter Rebbe—did much more than that; they succeeded in penetrating beneath the surface of the Torah's teachings and of the Jew and, sought out and uncovered their inner soul, and thereby revealing their internal cohesiveness and harmony.

Thus, the Torah, when discussing the loss of these great leaders ("The plague that is not written in the Torah"), follows it with the result of their demise—they remain few in number; the Jewish people lose not only their stature, but they are diminished in number as well; for individuals are only able to be counted as constituent members of a group, when there is some unifying force that keeps them together.

This is the meaning of the "curse" that when the leaders are gone it diminishes the actual number of Jews since they lack the spiritual ingredient that transforms a scattered number of disparate individuals into one group consisting of so many beautiful hues and colors.

And this is one additional aspect of the significance of Chai-the 18th of Elul. With the introduction of the Ba'al Shem Tov and Rabbi Schnur Zalman and their teachings

that illuminated the souls of the Jewish people with the inner dimension of Torah, they instilled new life into the Jewish nation and, in a certain sense, increased their numbers exponentially as well.

Not Inevitable

It may be suggested, that an additional reason why the death of the righteous is characterized as a "plague that is not written in this Torah," is to underscore that it cannot be written in the Torah for that would guarantee its inevitability.

By not overtly enunciating this plague, the Torah alludes to the belief—discussed in Kabbalah—that the souls of the righteous never truly leave this world. This is especially true of those souls whose lives were devoted to instilling life into the Jewish nation by focusing on their inner spiritual identities, as were the souls of the Ba'al Shem Tov and R. Schneur Zalman.

Their emphasis on the inner light of Torah might also be alluded to in the description of this "curse" (read; hidden blessing) as "not written in this Torah," because it alludes to the inner, esoteric and concealed soul of Torah that, by definition, cannot be articulated, that they revealed and disseminated.

A Humble Nation

With this novel interpretation we can suggest that the follow up statement in the Torah that we will become a numerically diminished people can also to be understood in a positive fashion. This verse seems to echo another verse that refers to the Jewish people as the "smallest of all the nations."

The term "small" is also understood to mean that we possess the trait of humility. We have acquired this trait as a result of our acute awareness of G-d's greatness through all of the miracles He performed for us, as well as through all the teachings of the Torah that have made His presence so vivid in our minds and hearts.

Reinterpretation

And here is how we can reinterpret the curse that it should read as a blessing:

When we are "afflicted" (read: blessed) with an introduction to the transcendent, spiritual and mystical teaching of the Torah that it defies transcription; and these teachings are inscribed and etched into our souls, hearts and minds, then we become a diminished (read; humble, self-abnegating) nation. Our egos that cause us to become separated from each other are diminished.

To be sure, the terms "humble" and "self-abnegating" were not intended, G-d forbid, to mean meekness and helpless in

the face of threats to our people. It means acquiring an awareness of G-d's overwhelming presence in our lives and a lack of condescension in our relationships. This form of humility is not at all inconsistent with a sense of pride in our Jewish identities.

The Ba'al Shem Tov and the Alter Rebbe—whose birthdays we celebrated this Shabbos on the 18th of Elul—enabled us, and continue to empower us, to access that inner, "unwritten," dimension of Torah, which helps us achieve the state of true humility.

A Taste of the Future

These hidden teachings will be fully revealed in the Messianic Age. However, through the teachings of the Ba'al Shem Tov and the Alter Rebbe, we were given a taste and a sample of these G-dly teachings to help prepare us for that time when the entire world will be engulfed with an awareness of G-d that will engender true unity and love amongst people.

In the words of the prophet Isaiah:

> "The world will be filled with the knowledge of G-d as the water covers the sea bed."

The entire world will be one great Mikveh, and we will all be immersed in its waters. It is no accident that the Hebrew word for "immersion" "*tevilah*" contains the letters of the word "*habittul*" which means total nullification,

because our existence will be totally absorbed within G-d's presence.

ESSAY TWENTY-THREE
THE SEVEN BLESSED ILLNESSES

Even a Jew estranged from his or her Judaism possesses a hidden love for G-d embedded deeply in his or her soul.

To arouse this love, one must reflect on G-d's greatness and His presence in our lives, among other meditations.

ESSAY TWENTY-THREE

THE SEVEN BLESSED ILLNESSES

Curses or Hidden Blessings

This week's parsha contains the harshest threats of pain and suffering for the Jewish people if they fail to follow G-d's commandments. This lengthy section is called the *Tochecha* (rebuke).

In truth, the *Tochecha* can be read on two levels. On the first level these harsh admonitions sound like horrific curses intended to jolt us out of our reverie and make us take life seriously.

On a higher and deeper level, however, these "curses" are actually sublime, but hidden, blessings; even more powerful than any of the overt blessings in the Torah. To capture the positive dimension of these "curses," one has to dig deep beneath the surface.

Let us examine, as an illustration, one of the "curses":

> "G-d will strike you with inflammation, illnesses, burning fevers, unquenchable thirst, with the sword, with blasting and withering, and this will pursue you until you perish."

How can we possibly interpret this verse in a positive vein? How can illnesses or death by sword be a blessing?

Lovesick!

To understand the hidden meaning of this verse we must first define illness. In the physical sense, it is a debilitating deficiency in one's physical, emotional or spiritual well-being. But there is also a positive form of illness that is described in the Biblical Song of Songs (2:5) as "lovesick."

In Chassidic thought, this sickness arises from our passion to get closer to G-d. We discover that, no matter how close we can get, G-d will always be unreachable because He is infinite. To satisfy our desire to get close to and "capture" G-d in our lives, we must study Torah, G-d's wisdom, for He and His wisdom are one. With Torah in our minds, G-d resides in us.

This love is especially alive when we pray. Prayer awakens our inner passion for G-d to the point of lovesickness. We then quench our thirst for Him with Torah study.

In general terms, during weekdays when we reflect on the mundane activities that occupy most of our time and how far we are from G-d, we can arouse this lovesickness. It is on Shabbos that are we able to satisfy our love for G-d because we rise to a higher spiritual plane and can feel G-d's closeness.

On a more general level, throughout our stay in exile we are lovesick for His elusive intimacy. The more elusive it is the more we pine for G-d's closeness and love for us. This we will fully experience in the endless Shabbos of history, the Messianic Age.

With this introduction in mind, we can see how the "curses" enumerated in the foregoing verse are actually manifestations of our lovesickness for G-d.

Shachefes-Cool Love

The first manifestation of our illness is *shachefes,* which, according to Rashi, refers to a disease that debilitates and causes swelling of the body.

In a positive vein, bodily disfigurement is suggestive of those who are so passionate about getting closer to G-d that their physical lives become disfigured. This does not mean that their physical health suffers, for a Jew is required by Biblical law to maintain good health. Rather, it means that they change the configuration of their physical life. All their physical activities are designed to accommodate their spiritual needs. Moreover, because of their blissful state when they are filled with G-dly love, they feel pleasure in every aspect of their lives; everything they engage in becomes a source of pleasure and delight.

The swelling of one's body can actually be understood as a positive sign that one's physical life has improved. This is

based on a story in the Talmud concerning a fateful meeting between the Roman General Vespasian and the great Sage, Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakai. Vespasian was informed that he had been elected Emperor. Strangely, when he heard the good news he could not remove his shoes. The rabbi explained that the swelling of his feet was caused by the delight he experienced when he heard the good tidings. The rabbi quoted the verse in Provers (15:30): "Good tidings fatten the bone."

When people are filled with uplifting spiritual feelings they also experience the lifting up and expansion of their natural feelings. Their feeling of emotional and physical well-being is enhanced as well.

This form of love is a "cool" love; we experience it when we are enjoying the pleasure of G-d's presence in our lives.

Kadachas and *Dalekes*-Firery Love

The second manifestation of lovesickness is *kadachas,* which means fever. In the positive sense of the word, it refers to the fiery passion of the soul. This form of love is the opposite of the former one. This is a fiery and passionate love.

The third illness, *dalekes*, is a more intense, fiery love to the point of delirium.

The difference between *kadachas* and *dalekes,* is not only in degree of their passion, their difference is also manifest in their ability to function. A person with a fever may not have any other symptoms and it alone may be the only indication that he or she is suffering from some illness.

In spiritual terms, the *kadchas* form of love does not get in the way of a person's normal life. By contrast, the *dalekes* individual will become "delirious" and be unable to function in any venue other than having passion for G-d.

Charchur-"I'm so Thirsty!"

The fourth form of illness is *charchur*. This is an even more intense fever, which causes a tremendous thirst. An afflicted individual can only quench his thirst with Torah, which is Biblically identified with water. But no sooner than these afflicted individuals drink thirstily, they find that they are still famished.

A story is told of the great Chassidic Master, Rabbi Levi Yitzchak of Berditchev, who cried out immediately after Yom Kippur, "I'm so thirsty." Because of his old age and weakened physical state, his family became concerned, and rushed to bring him a glass of water. But Rabbi Levi Yitzchak ignored the water, opened a volume of the Talmud tractate Sukkah and began to study with gusto. An hour later, his family heard him cry out again, "I'm so thirsty." Quickly they ran to bring him another glass of

water, only to realize that he had not touched the first glass; he was continuing his study of the Talmud.

This routine continued through the night. The next morning, and after many untouched glasses of water, Rabbi Levi Yitzchak completed the Tractate (more than 110 sides of intricate Talmudic law). At that point, he still had not broken the fast or had anything to drink. The bewildered family members asked him why he kept on crying that he was thirsty and yet did not take even one sip of water.

He answered that he was thirsty for Torah study, since throughout the day of Yom Kippur he had been engaged in prayer. He needed to learn Torah, G-d's "love letter" to us, and could not get enough.

This is the model for one afflicted with *charchur.*

These four forms of illness have one thing in common: they are internal illnesses.

In spiritual terms, this means that we have the power to generate love for G-d from within. The Alter Rebbe, in his classic work, the Tanya, explains that we have a natural propensity for loving G-d. Even a Jew estranged from his or her Judaism possesses a hidden love for G-d embedded deeply in his or her soul. To arouse this love, one must reflect on G-d's greatness and His presence in our lives, among other meditations.

External Motivators

There are other ways a Jew can develop a love for G-d. These are through external influences. They are suggested by the three final forms of affliction:

The fifth form is called *cherev,* the sword. Rashi applies this to foreign armies that attempt to attack us.

In a positive and spiritual sense, this means that when we see the threats from the outside, we are inspired to become more committed Jews.

More to the point, this refers to the powerful negative impulses we all possess. In relation to our soul, our inner identity, they are considered to have come from a foreign invading army. The realization that we have been attacked by this hostile external force jolts us into action and awakens our love for G-d.

Shidafon and *Yeirakon*

According to Rashi, the sixth and seventh threats are called, *shidafon* and *yeirakon;* both forms of drought. The former is caused by strong winds, and the latter, which causes the crops to turn yellow, by heat and dryness.

There are times that when we look around at the world and hope to see a world that can inspire and excite us, we find a drought instead.

In their milder forms, the winds of empty slogans, inane fads, heretical views and hedonistic pursuits make us want to flee the world in which we live. We must come to the realization that there is no need to escape our world; instead we should look for the good and holy within ourselves and the world around us. Realization of the bankruptcy of society should actually spur greater passion for truth and meaning in our lives.

In its more destructive form, the drought which we witness, particularly in the last two centuries, is the utter moral bankruptcy of the secular world. It is a world that has given us violent and destructive revolutions, two world wars, a Holocaust and communist tyrannies that have claimed the lives of tens of millions.

Initially, reflection on this bleak fact, especially on the recent troubling events, can demoralize us and lead us to depression.

However, the Torah's hidden blessing here is that when we realize the bankruptcy of the world we recognize it also as a sign that we are living at the end of Galus-exile and that evil is making its final, bitter stand.

Moreover, this frightening hubris of evil is meant to inspire us to unleash the opposing positive forces of our souls and get us to actualize our hidden love for G-d. This will inevitably pave the way for us to greet Moshiach even before we enter the New Year of 5778.